

The Strange Death of the Soviet Union

Nationalism, Democratization, and Leadership

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Deep in the primeval forests that were the cradle of Slavic civilization, three modern heirs to this rich legacy gathered in December 1991. Boris Yeltsin, the tall Russian leader whose shock of white hair highlighted his famous flair for the dramatic, conspired with the freshly-elected Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk and Belorussian leader Stanislav Shushkevich to take a step that had been unthinkable less than a decade before. The Soviet Union, they declared, now ceased to exist, and all that replaced it was a nebulous notion called the “Commonwealth of Independent States.”¹

Just two weeks after the news arrived from these dark woods, Gorbachev “drew the necessary conclusions” and tendered his resignation. The Nobel Peace Prize laureate, the man that ended the Cold War, the only Soviet leader with the courage to break the back of Stalin’s ruthless regime, had stepped down a broken man, ignominiously ousted from his Kremlin desk by the upstart sovereigns. By the start of 1992, the

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¹ Leonid M. Kravchuk. *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, January 9, 1992, partially reproduced in A.B. Veber, V.T. Loginov, G.S. Ostroumov, and A.S. Chernyaev (eds.) *Soyuz Mozhno Bylo Sokhranit’: Belaya Kniga: Dokumenty i Fakty o Politikye M.S. Gorbacheva po Reformirovaniu i Sokhraneniui mnogonatsional’nogo gosudarstva* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo “Aprel’-85,” 1995) p.307.

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Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the nuclear superpower that sparked red revolution across the globe for seven decades, had vanished from the map with just the tiniest puff of smoke. The Communist regime that had survived over 20 million casualties in World War II, that had endured despite massacring millions of its own finest citizens in mad fits of paranoia, had softly dissolved in a time of relative peace.

How can we possibly comprehend these events? Why did the Soviet Union collapse? What does this historical milestone have to tell us about the fate of other multiethnic states?

The Puzzle of Soviet Collapse

There is little doubt that the USSR faced a grave crisis in the late 1980s. Economic growth rates had steadily declined under Leonid Brezhnev, and the tailspin only gathered force after his death. Wholesale industrialization had radically raised production in the 1930s, 40s and 50s, but Stalin's obsession with huge and heavy industry eventually generated more such output than the economy could usefully absorb and left the vital consumer sector virtually barren compared to the West. The command economy had always produced distortions, as mendacious managers would fulfill the letter but not the spirit of the plan in the absence of market competition. More ominously, central planners in Moscow found themselves increasingly unable to handle the ever-growing complexity of the modern economy. The times demanded flexibility and on-site adjustment, while Gosplan required guidelines and intricate multilevel channels of communication with an expanding array of economic actors. Ironically, the Soviet system had been multiplying its supply of educated workers throughout the post-war period, and these ambitious sectors of society found their upward mobility blocked by the inability of the Soviet system to expand in accordance with economic needs.

While consumers were certainly not happy about this state of affairs, the Soviet military complex was far more worried. The system was failing to encourage technological innovation, which in turn threatened the very security of the USSR. Indeed, clashes between American and Soviet proxy states in the Middle East dramatically demonstrated the inferiority of Soviet military equipment and highlighted the need for some kind of change if the USSR was to compete. Ronald Reagan's brash "Star Wars" initiative only highlighted the importance of technology for future security and cast light on the Soviet Union's increasing inability to keep up. Thus, one of the first calls for radical change emanated from the Soviet

military-industrial complex, as Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov cited Marx to admonish that nothing depended on the economy more than the military.²

To make things even worse, these material crises combined with a profoundly spiritual one, as the last true believers in the Communist ideal appeared to have died out with Brezhnev's generation. Soviet politicians in the late 1980s had come of age long after the 1917 revolution, and therefore knew nothing of the idealism characteristic of many in that cadre of officials. While some had cut their political teeth believing that Khrushchev would put the Soviet state on the right track to prosperity, cynicism soon became the norm and few believed that they would ever experience the cornucopia of Communism. Technologically inspired contacts with the West, expanding slightly under Brezhnev, only reinforced this loss of faith. Not only did average citizens increasingly see how their livelihoods compared to the material abundance of the West, but even top Soviet elites, reveling in their exclusive villas and access to special stores, came to see that their lifestyles actually paled in comparison with the luxury lavished on their counterparts in Western Europe and the United States.

Such factors force reform. Failing this, they force a change in leadership, which then pursues reform. *But only in unusual circumstances do profound socioeconomic crises actually bring down the state itself*, especially one with the staying power demonstrated by the USSR over years of isolation, internal turmoil and war. Indeed, the major continental empires tended to collapse only in the wake of world war, and the Ottomans remained the "Sick Man of Europe" for centuries before finally succumbing.³ And while the Soviet state disintegrated in 1991, the multicultural Russian Federation within it endured despite facing the same socioeconomic crisis. The puzzle, then, is not that the Soviet regime embarked on a program of radical *reform*, including systemic economic change as well as political liberalization. This has been well elaborated in a number of recent volumes on the Soviet demise, notably the competing accounts of Mark Kramer and Jerry Hough.⁴ The real mystery is why the

² See Celeste Wallander, *The Sources of Russian Foreign Policy after the Cold War* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996) p.134.

³ This point has been made by Mark Kramer.

⁴ Prominent books on the subject of the Soviet collapse include: John B. Dunlop, *The Rise of Russia and the Fall of the Soviet Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Jack F. Matlock, *Autopsy on an Empire: The American Ambassador's Account of the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (NY: Random House, 1996); Jerry F. Hough, *Democratization and Revolution in the USSR, 1985–1991* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1997); David Remnick, *Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire* (NY: Vintage Books, 1994); and Mark Kramer (ed.) *The Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Olin Seminar Series volume, Harvard University, forthcoming 1999). Prominent articles include: Valerie Bunce, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, v.14, no.4, 1998, pp. 323–354; Anatoly Khazanov, "The Collapse of the Soviet Union: Nationalism During Perestroika and Afterwards," *Nationalities Papers* v.22, no.1, 1994, pp. 157–174; George Breslauer, "Observations on Soviet Imperial Disintegration,"

Soviet crisis resulted in the epoch-making *collapse* of this geopolitical giant.

Critically, we were able to say that the Soviet Union had “collapsed” only after the central political institutions of the USSR (including its presidency, parliament, ministries and local organs) had been liquidated. The Soviet Union was not said to have “collapsed” when the Communist Party relinquished its monopoly on politics in 1990, and it was already said to have “collapsed” by the time Boris Yeltsin’s reformers smashed the command economy with their bold program of price liberalization in January 1992. The critical fact is that the USSR was a union state divided into ethnically distinct territories known as “republics” (I call such union states “ethnofederations”), and it collapsed only when three things happened: (1) when the leaders of the Russian, Ukrainian and Belorussian republics stole away to a villa near Minsk and declared that “the USSR, as a subject of international law and a geopolitical reality, ceases to exist;” (2) when the other republic leaders agreed to this; and (3) when Gorbachev recognized this decision and entered the ranks of the politically unemployed.⁵ The point when these three things happened was the point at which the USSR’s most important political institutions evanesced and was the point at which the term “former Soviet Union” entered common parlance.⁶ The Soviet collapse, therefore, is inextricably bound up with the

Post-Soviet Geography v.35, no.4, 1994, pp.216-220; Andus Park, “Gorbachev and the Role of Personality in History,” *Studies in Comparative Communism*, v.25, no.1, March 1992, pp.47-56; Nils R. Muiznieks, “The Influence of the Baltic Popular Movements on the Process of Soviet Disintegration,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, v.47, no.1, 1995, pp. 3-25; Alexander Dallin, “Causes of the Collapse of the USSR,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, v.8, no.4, 1992, pp. 279-302; Paul A. Goble, “CIS, Boom, Bah: The Commonwealth of Independent States and the Post-Soviet Successor States,” in Allen C. Lynch and Kenneth Thompson (eds.) *Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia in a World of Change* (New York: University Press of America, 1994) pp. 181-205; Rasma Karklins, “Explaining Regime Change in the Soviet Union,” *Europe-Asia Studies* v.46, no.1, 1994, pp. 29-45.

⁵ TASS International Service in Russian, 8 December 1991, 1920 GMT, FBIS-SOV-91-236 p.47.

⁶ Had the republics not made these fateful decisions, there is little reason to believe that Soviet institutions would not have continued to endure long into the future, although they would certainly have adapted themselves to new situations as they had been doing ever since Gorbachev came to power in 1985. The only conceivable alternative sources for the actual overthrow of Soviet institutions would have been a hard-line coup or a true social revolution like that which occurred in 1917. Yet the hard-liners were all aiming precisely at preserving Soviet institutions, so a hard-line takeover could not have been seen as the “collapse” of Soviet institutions. This leaves only the possibility of a social revolution, which by all indications would not have occurred in the then-foreseeable future, even in the face of the economic crisis. Indeed, in response to the attempted August 1991 coup, Yeltsin called for a nationwide strike, but as Jerry Hough (1997) has noted, only a tiny fraction of Russian society responded, suggesting that the potential for anti-regime public activism was very low. In addition, economic conditions proceeded to get much worse for the vast bulk of the Russian population in the years immediately following the Soviet collapse, yet there has been extremely little social unrest as a result—

decisions of key republic leaders to dismantle Soviet institutions in 1991. For this reason, a convincing explanation of the USSR's demise must begin by examining the behavior of the republic leaders whose willful machinations actually brought down the USSR, as well as Gorbachev's efforts to influence them in the opposite direction.

The Stability of Ethnofederal States

In these pages, I argue that the USSR collapsed when Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev sought to transform an ethnofederation preserved primarily by coercion into one based mainly on consent. Critically, the particular demographic and institutional structure of the Soviet Union rendered it extremely fractious in the face of democratization, a policy central to Gorbachev's quest for "consent." But despite this fragility, there was room for creative leadership to have persuaded key republic leaders to remain within a "renewed" Union of Sovereign States. And while it is fashionable these days to deride Gorbachev for his failures, what is remarkable is just how tantalizingly close he came to successfully pulling off this truly titanic transformation. In fact, his failure was in no way intrinsic to his transition strategy. He failed *not* because he somehow underestimated the power of nationalism, nor because he in some way neglected to act decisively at crucial moments, nor because he wrongly assessed the loyalty of some of his most important ministers. Instead, his failure lay in a largely secondary miscalculation—misjudging just how *incompetent* were these ministers, who in August 1991 embarked on a course of action that could not have been better scripted by the most devious foreign enemies of Soviet power. Furthermore, this failure mattered only because of the unstable constellation of incentives facing republics in the union.

Ethnofederations endure in at least one of two ways. Most obviously, leaders can hold them together by force. Alternatively, some ethnofederations contain a virtual harmony of interests that requires little if any coercion. Such harmonies of interests are not always obvious to the republics involved, of course. Thus in order to base a union primarily on consent instead of coercion, leaders must often engage in a complicated process of creating institutions, incentives or even identities such that each republic concludes that continued integration is in its own best interests. Because this process of trust-building is so delicate, state leaders quite

certainly nothing threatening the integrity of Russian political institutions. And this despite the fact that many important elements of society were not even being paid at all for long stretches of time. I thus see no plausible mechanism, other than actions taken by republic leaders, whereby the USSR would have "collapsed" within the future that was at all foreseeable in 1991 as a result of any of the pressures theorists have argued the regime was under. The onus is on theorists who do not give sufficient treatment to the republics to demonstrate a plausible mechanism whereby the "causes" they cite actually would have led to the collapse of Soviet institutions.

commonly rely on the threat of force to hold their ethnofederations together, as regions so diverse as Scotland and Kashmir have discovered over the years.

The Soviet Union, like the Russian Empire before it, had won most of its republics by conquest, rarely if ever giving them the opportunity to decide their own fates. Gorbachev himself had little reason to doubt that he could have kept the USSR together coercively, relying on his mighty military to move in were any republic bold enough to actually threaten the union's integrity. Indeed, the Soviet regime had shown little hesitation in responding with brutal force to even the most minor incidents of nationally-inspired unrest.⁷ By sending the troops into Baku to quash the Azerbaijani Popular Front in early 1990, killing over a hundred people in the process, Gorbachev revealed his willingness to resort to force if he saw a need for it.⁸ Indeed, when Jerry Hough made his unfortunate but widely known prediction that the union would survive in the Fall of 1991, he was largely just assuming that Gorbachev would employ military muscle to preserve his country as Abraham Lincoln had done in the US a century before.⁹

While Gorbachev's top priority was indeed to preserve his union, and while there is little evidence to suggest that he was against the use of force to do so if necessary, he *preferred* to restructure the union in such a way that force would not be needed in the first place. He dreamed of revitalizing the Soviet Union such that its member republics would no longer feel threatened and would instead voluntarily *choose* to stay in it. That is, he tried to transform an ethnofederation founded on force into one based primarily on consent.

This task was certainly not hopeless, and quite crucially, there is no reason to have assumed that the Soviet Union would have collapsed simply because it contained ethnically distinct republics, as has Valerie Bunce in recent work.¹⁰ Two sets of empirical facts demonstrate that such a simple reference to "nationalism" or "national-federalism" is insufficient. First, if ethnofederations were inherently bound to fall apart, then polyethnic Russia as we know it today would naturally have collapsed along with the USSR in 1991, and it clearly did not. Even more compelling is the second set of empirical facts: While the Baltic republics and Ukraine

⁷ For example, the regime crushed popular nationalist demonstrations that emerged in the wake of destalinization in Georgia in 1956. See Darrell Slider, "Democratization in Georgia," in Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott (eds.) *Conflict, cleavage, and change in Central Asia and the Caucasus* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997) p.158.

⁸ I am grateful to Mark Kramer for pointing this out.

⁹ Hough 1997.

¹⁰ The reason why the USSR, Yugoslavic and Czechoslovakia collapsed during the transition from Communism while other states like Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary did not, she argues, is that the former states all had "national-federal" institutions while the latter did not. See Bunce 1998.

did spearhead the drive to bring down the Soviet Union in late 1991, many other republics rallied actually to *revive* their union state. Indeed, had the USSR contained only Russia and 14 Uzbekistans, it would surely have endured. Furthermore, even Ukraine's surge to secession was far from foreordained, and its position evolved gradually over the course of 1990–1991 in a complicated political ballet involving the Ukrainian people, their republic leaders and Moscow. In addition, while many in the West largely equated Russia with the USSR, *Russia itself* banded together with Ukraine and Belarus to snuff out the union's flickering candle, a very mysterious act indeed if one invokes nationalism to explain republic behavior—and even more mysterious if one takes Russian imperialism to be a historical given. These seemingly contradictory patterns demand explanation and are pivotal to a precise understanding of the union's strange death.

The USSR, however, belonged to a particular class of ethnofederations that are extremely vulnerable in the face of democratization and the removal of centripetal coercion. The central problem for any ethnofederation is one of commitment. By remaining in a union, each republic takes on a risk that it will be exploited at the hands of other republics. In authoritarian regimes, republic leaders tend not to care about such risks since they themselves are beholden more to central authorities than to their own constituents—and when they do decide to care, they are swiftly swept from office. When ethnofederations democratize, however, they radically alter the incentives of republic leaders in two ways.¹¹ First, democratization forces republic leaders to pay primary attention to local interests as opposed to those of the central leadership, since their power now depends more on the former than on the latter.¹² Second, political liberalization calls into serious question the prior balance of ethnic group and republic power in the ethnofederation. Suddenly, each republic faces the prospect of radical nationalists coming to power in other republics, perhaps even proving able to take control of federal institutions, which could then be used exploitatively. In addition, if democracy has not been tried before, republics have very little idea about what will constitute power under the new arrangements, an uncertainty that accentuates these fears of exploitation. The fear is not so much that Hobbes' Leviathan would disappear, but that it might now be *captured*. For a hegemonic republic like mighty Russia, this was not a concern. Its vast size and great

¹¹ Gorbachev embarked on his policies of glasnost'' (openness) as a means of reinvigorating Soviet society after long years of Brezhnevian malaise. He later introduced competitive elections as a means of outflanking conservative opponents by giving himself a new base of authority and, even more critically, enfranchising a new and predictably more liberal political force. These causes of Soviet democratization have been well documented elsewhere and will not be rehashed here. See in particular the relevant chapters in Kramer 1998 and Hough 1997. My interest is in the effects of political liberalization on the ethnofederal institutions of the Soviet state.

¹² George Breslauer made this point in his 1994 article.

population gave it every chance to be the one doing the capturing and made it highly unlikely to become a victim. But for just these reasons, all non-hegemonic republics find themselves facing a much higher degree of risk in this time of transitional uncertainty.

Yet just because integration is risky does *not* mean that no republic will tolerate it—were people one-hundred-percent risk-averse, humans would certainly not be flying airplanes or eating much more than berries and nuts. This now brings us back to the first effect of democratization: the shift in the locus of power from center to region. The critical question becomes: What are the specific republic interests to which leaders respond, and how do these interests affect a republic's willingness to accept the risk of integration?

The pivotal republic interests in the USSR revolved around disparities in national economic development. The Soviet ethnofederation was structurally fragile because it contained too many republics that were as wealthy as or wealthier than Russia. Republics that were far less developed economically than the rest had reason to believe that they would be much worse off as independent states. For the Central Asian republics, therefore, secession meant sharply reducing their own access to high-value-added goods, high-wage jobs, development investment and direct budgetary transfers. Their remote geographic locations made a massive influx of international capital and goods unlikely, and the only alternative “partners” to Russia in the region were much less developed than they themselves were: Afghanistan, China, Iran. Incentives were strong, therefore, to accept the risks involved in dealing with Russia, at least so long as they might use it to escape the relative poverty in which they then wallowed. While they sought greater autonomy and actively promoted the advancement of their own ethnic groups within their republics, they tended to stop short of outright secession.

Those republics at least as developed as Russia, on the other hand, were not sacrificing nearly so much hope by leaving the USSR and did not share the perception in the late Gorbachev period that Russia's economy would “pull them up.” In fact, many argued at the time that they had much more to gain than the Central Asian states by seceding, since they could then enter world markets with their developed infrastructure unfettered by Russia's requirements. The Baltic states and Ukraine therefore anticipated rapid integration into rising European institutions. While complicating factors of course produced a few exceptions, statistical analysis reveals a strong correlation between relative wealth and the eagerness of each republic to secede; rich republics demonstrated a much higher degree of separatism than did poor ones.¹³

These wealth disparities were deeply rooted in modern history and came to embed themselves in popular consciousness, even national

¹³ Author.

consciousness. The people and leaders of the republics did not take out their calculators, read the latest economic statistics and reach the appropriate decisions in a perfectly rational way.¹⁴ Although a few academics may in fact have done this, I am talking primarily about differences in wealth and development that were *obvious* to the vast majority of people. While Soviet statistics did not provide an undistorted picture, it was clear to people in the USSR which republics were the best off and which were lagging, as will become vivid in the pages that follow. These widespread popular impressions were based not just on reported statistics, but on personal travel, conversations with friends and relatives, movies, television and other common experiences of Soviet life. Thus for most residents of the USSR, it was clear and widely known that the Baltic states enjoyed a higher material standard of living than did Russia, which in turn enjoyed a higher standard of living than did Central Asia. As such differences persisted over decades or even centuries, “Uzbeks” and “Tajiks,” for example, came to see themselves as being underdeveloped relative to Russia (although they often simultaneously viewed themselves as being more cultured or possessing the greater national heritage). These perceptions also became an important part of a status hierarchy of nations that David Laitin has recently begun to document in a very interesting public opinion survey project in the former USSR.¹⁵ Such status differentials are largely based on the desire for development, putting those who “have” in a category higher than those who “have not.” Just as Laitin demonstrates that diaspora Russians were more likely to learn the high-status Estonian language than the low-status Kazakh one, republics tended to prefer integrating with high-status republics as opposed to the low-status ones.

In this manner, then, economic factors conditioned the ways in which people were interpreting their surroundings, their options, and by extension drove republic policies in the early 1990s. When Gorbachev’s democratization campaign forced republic leaders to find a local base of political support so as to win an election and stay in power, those in the least developed regions found it profitable to respond to this dominant and deeply-embedded “discourse of dependency,” or at least not to deviate from it too radically.¹⁶ Critically, there is little to suggest that the Central Asians were somehow more lacking in national consciousness than were, say, Ukrainians. For example, the Kazakhs had revolted against Russian rule many times in the past, and they had even mounted

¹⁴ Although rational choice models are a good way to model this behavior.

¹⁵ Laitin, David D. *Identity in Formation* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998).

¹⁶ If real relative economic positions are changing rapidly, however, leaders do have an incentive to follow “reality,” although it is expected that it would take time to disabuse the population of long-standing notions of dependency, and that lags would be significant and would not reflect all rapid fluctuations, but would follow the general, broader trends.

the first serious national challenge to Gorbachev in the December 1986 riots. They certainly had grounds for grievance as great as those of Ukraine—this nomadic nation lost nearly two million people when the Soviet regime brutally “sedentarized” it in the 1930s, and this was only one of many accounts of victimization found in Kazakhstan’s press in the Gorbachev era. In fact, even before gaining independence, the official Kazakh leadership embarked on an aggressive policy designed to “Kazakhize” its “non-native” population and to establish the Kazakh group firmly as the dominant one in all key state institutions. Thus while Kazakhs’ relative poverty did not keep them from vigorously pressing culturalist claims, when talk turned to the specific option of *secession*, they demurred. Those few radicals that did issue such demands found little support amongst the population as a whole, and as a result republic leaders never found it profitable to support them. The point here is *not* that Kazakhs or Uzbeks had a strong national consciousness prepackaged and ready to use as soon as the opportunity struck, and that Ukraine also had this, but that it is most unclear that what the Central Asians did have was any less potent than that possessed by Ukraine. As becomes clear below, this claim reflects the *weakness* of Ukrainian national consciousness as much as the strength of that common in Central Asia. At this point I would venture an even bolder *general* claim: *virtually every Soviet nation had in its history and culture some kind of symbolism capable of galvanizing a secession movement.*¹⁷ This means we must focus primarily on the forces that determined why politicians found it profitable to invoke these resources for separatist purposes in some places but not others. Many factors affected whether leaders chose to play the many different “ethnic cards” they held in the late Soviet period; but when talk turned from language policy or the schools to the specific issue of *secession*, it was primarily the leaders of the richest republics that found it in their own political interest to make this high-stakes move.

The remaining pages of this article show how this logic of ethnofederal political economy played itself out to bring down the Soviet Union, explaining not only the fact of the collapse, but also the detailed patterns along which the critical cracks in its structure formed. The next section briefly examines the efforts of Mikhail Gorbachev to restructure and save his union, arguing that he came tantalizingly close to succeeding. His

¹⁷ With the probable exception of Belarus. As is reflected in linguistic assimilation statistics, Belorussians are far more assimilated into Russian culture than even Ukrainians, and there are few instances in Russo-Belorussian history with which Belorussian nationalists can plausibly claim grievous victimization at the hands of Russia. For example, the Great Famine of the early 1930s which devastated Ukraine largely missed Belarus. Most observers therefore agree that Belorussians in fact possess only an extremely weak sense of cultural distinctness from Russia, rendering secessionist claims largely untenable. This would be expected to change after a period of national independence forces people there to see themselves in important contexts as people “other” than Russians.

failure, however, depended not only on his own efforts, but critically on the interests and behavior of the 15 republics that constituted the USSR, and the following sections trace the roots of the Soviet collapse into the politics of Russia, Ukraine and Central Asia.

The Delicate Act of Crafting Commitments: Gorbachev's Near Triumph

The USSR was delicate, not doomed. Despite the fragility of the Soviet ethnofederation, there was still room for creative leadership to have crafted the kinds of credible commitments necessary to convince the republics that their union was worth saving, that they would not bear grave risks if they failed to secede. In fact, I argue here that Gorbachev had embarked on just such a strategy, granting unprecedented levels of decentralization to republics as a way of reassuring them that the “new union” would not be an exploitative one, but would instead bring republics together to realize mutual interests. But by far the most important point—and this is too often overlooked—is that Gorbachev could have mustered Moscow’s military might at any time before August 1991 to have kept the republics together by force. Indeed, Gorbachev made the conscious *choice* to try and shift the foundations of federal power from coercion to consent, and it was indeed a choice—there was nothing involuntary or irrevocable about it. And precisely this “revocability” was Gorbachev’s greatest cause for confidence. Each republic knew that Gorbachev *could* call in the troops should it go too far, and this provided extra impetus for all but the most radical republics to sit down at the bargaining table. Thus, with a solid strategy of trust-building backed by an unsavory but sound Plan B, the Soviet leader had good reason to be optimistic.

From the 1950’s through the mid-1980s, nationalist incidents in the Soviet Union had been few and far between, and new Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev did not anticipate that these would become a major issue when he came to power in 1985. In fact, he initially aimed actually to re-centralize the USSR, withdrawing much of the *de facto* autonomy which republic leaders had come to enjoy under Brezhnev’s “stability of cadres” policy and which central authorities regarded as corruption. The new Soviet leader stressed “internationalism” (as opposed to “localism”), with the Russian language as the *lingua franca*.¹⁸

Yet by February 1988, Gorbachev was forced to call nationality “the most fundamental vital issue of our society.”¹⁹ During this interval in time,

¹⁸ Hill, Ronald J. “Managing Ethnic Conflict,” in Stephen White, Rita Di Leo, and Ottorino Cappelli (eds.) *The Soviet Transition: From Gorbachev to Yeltsin* (Portland, Oreg.: Frank Cass, 1993), pp. 57–74, pp. 61–62.

¹⁹ Gorbachev, M.S., *Izbrannye rechi i stat'i* v.6 (Moscow, 1989) p. 374, reproduced in A.B. Veber, V.T. Loginov, G.S. Ostroumov, and A.S. Chernyaev (eds.), *Soyuz Mozhno Bylo*

ethnic conflicts and demands had erupted onto the Soviet scene with striking power as Gorbachev's policies of political liberalization and *glasnost* (opening) took hold. Ethnic Kazakhs took to the streets to protest the replacement of their republic's leader with an ethnic Russian in December 1986. Cultural activists in the Baltic states, often with the help of local governmental authorities, organized mass demonstrations to confront Moscow with their demands for national autonomy, compensation for past wrongs, or group privileges. Armenians launched what became a violent movement to remove the Armenian-populated region of Nagorno-Karabakh from the jurisdiction of Azerbaijan in 1987.

Gorbachev's first instinct was to rely on political methods, trying to "reason" with the nationalists, presenting them with overwhelming evidence that they were better off staying in the union, albeit a renewed one. "Is it rational to push for isolation (*zamknutost*), for particularization (*obosobleniya*)," he asked Estonians in a 1988 appeal, "when the leading tendencies in the world have become integration, the interstate division of labor, international cooperation and the creation of a single market?"²⁰ Soviet leaders worked furiously to put in place a legal framework that would channel these demands and simultaneously allow Gorbachev ample opportunity to persuade restive republic masses that union, not secession, was the rationally superior option. He restructured the Communist Party along national lines in 1990, naming a Ukrainian the official "second secretary." Also in 1990, the Soviet legislature passed a law that explicitly allowed for secession, although it required not only a referendum in support of independence, but also the agreement of the rest of the USSR for the republic actually to realize its right to leave the union. The central piece of legislation was the new law "on the delimitation of powers between the USSR and the subjects of the federation." Adopted on April 26, 1990, it mandated substantial devolution of power to the republics, allowing them to have direct relations with foreign states, to the point of exchanging diplomats, and giving them substantial control over economic policy.²¹ The Soviet Congress also created a commission to produce a new Constitution that included substantial decentralization of power.²²

In specific cases where local nationalists had refused to be pacified by these moderate efforts, however, Gorbachev was not unwilling to heed the

Sokhranit': Belaya Kniga: Dokumenty i Fakty o Politikye M.S. Gorbacheva po Reformirovaniu i Sokhraneniui mnogonatsional'nogo gosudarstva (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Aprel'-85," 1995), p. 17.

²⁰ Gorbachev, Mikhail, *Zhizn' i reformy* (Moscow: Novosti, 1995), v.1, p. 512.

²¹ Bagramov, E.A. (chief editor). *K soyuzu suverennykh narodov: Sbornik dokumentov KPSS, zakonadatel'nykh aktov, deklaratsiy, obrashcheniy i prezidentskikh ukazov, posvyashchennykh probleme natsional'no-gosudarstvennogo suvereniteta* (Moscow: Institut teorii i istorii sotsializma TsK KPSS, 1991), pp. 75–82.

²² *Vedomosti SSSR* 1989, pp. 112–113.

hard-liners' advice to send in the troops. Yet since these violent government actions were always localized and did not represent a reversal of the regime's liberalization policies, they backfired calamitously, succeeding primarily in alienating the entire population of these "hotspots." In Georgia, for example, most early political unrest had centered on environmental issues, opposing, for example, the Caucasian Mountain Railway in northern Georgia. But in April 1989, about 10,000 people streamed out into Tbilisi's streets to oppose the Abkhaz ASSR's recent petition to secede from Georgia. More radical demonstrators then raised demands for Georgian independence, whereupon Soviet troops moved in and brutally suppressed the rally, killing some 20 people, mostly women and children. In response to popular outrage, Gorbachev sent his trusted aide, and former Georgian Communist Party First Secretary, Eduard Shevardnadze, to the republic. Although angry crowds of youths physically turned their backs to him *en masse* in a dramatic show of defiance when he tried to address them, Shevardnadze managed to orchestrate a change in Georgian Party leadership.²³ But the new Communist Party head, Givi Gumbaridze, himself launched Georgia's intense official struggle for more autonomy. Tellingly, even he was soon overtaken by more radical forces in the 1990 parliamentary elections.²⁴ Indeed, Gorbachev's move to force local Communists to hold competitive elections was to alter the Soviet political landscape permanently. While Soviet intervention in Azerbaijan in January 1990 did cripple the nationalist Azerbaijani Popular Front (APF) in the short run,²⁵ in the long run the mass slaughter only deepened the APF's support amongst the people. Indeed, Azerbaijan remained one of the more separatist republics throughout 1990 and 1991, and the APF actually took over the government in early 1992.

The failure of both the government's attempts to "reason" with the nationalists and its initial, mal-prepared "gut reactions" forced a rethink in the Soviet leadership. Once republic- and local-level elections in the Spring of 1990 gave an official platform to many nationalists (especially in the Baltic republics where they gained strong majorities), Gorbachev and his allies realized they had to recognize the new authority of republic leaders and to take more heed of their demands for autonomy. They therefore embarked on a delicate process of crafting credible commitments that the republics would not be exploited as part of a grand effort to win the trust necessary to keep the union together peacefully. The central effort was to forge a New Union Treaty, the successor to the old Union Treaty of 1922 that marked the official founding of the USSR.

²³ Ryzhkov, Nikolai. *Perestroika: Istoriya Predatel'stv* (Moscow: Novosti, 1992).

²⁴ Jones 1992, pp. 77-79; Darrell Slider, "Democratization in Georgia," in Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott (eds.), *Conflict, cleavage, and change in Central Asia and the Caucasus* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.161.

²⁵ A point Mark Kramer has frequently raised in conversations on this subject.

The New Union treaty effort very nearly succeeded, although only after Gorbachev had made significant adjustments in his strategy for convincing the republics to sign it. At first, he sought not to negotiate directly with republic leaders themselves, instead forming a working group on July 24, 1990, to consult bilaterally with republic delegations of lower-level officials and experts. On the basis of this, Gorbachev's working group published a draft New Union Treaty in November 1990. Even the most unionist of republics lambasted this document, however, primarily because they had not been directly involved in drafting it; thus while most republics said they supported the idea of a New Union Treaty in principle, they found all kinds of reasons to oppose this particular version.

After a second draft New Union Treaty failed to make a breakthrough in March 1991, Gorbachev launched a dramatic effort to negotiate directly with republic leaders, building up the mutual trust necessary to find a draft that all (or at least most) would agree on and sign. The first breakthrough took place at the villa of Novo-Ogarevo in April 1991, where nine top republic officials and Gorbachev (the "9 + 1") announced agreement on a series of economic anti-crisis measures and pledged speedy completion of work on the New Union Treaty, conceiving of it as merely a "union of sovereign states."

By including top republic leaders in the negotiating process along with promising them substantial autonomy, Gorbachev's strategy of trust-building appeared to be working. Yeltsin later wrote that this move of Gorbachev's had surprised him, especially since the Soviet president now seemed willing to "significantly weaken the influence of the Moscow center on the Soviet Union's republics."²⁶ Momentum for negotiated decentralization gathered over the Summer of 1991, and in June the Novo-Ogarevo negotiators completed the third major draft New Union Treaty, explicitly recognizing the republics' own declarations of sovereignty in the first line of the preamble and neglecting to allot any state property to the reconstituted union, although the union would still be able to manage some property and use it to aid regions lagging in development, a clause clearly inserted at the behest of the Central Asian republics. By the end of the summer, Gorbachev, Yeltsin and the other republics had hammered out an agreement that seven republics (Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Belarus, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan) were ready to sign on 20 August 1991, and Ukraine and Azerbaijan had hinted that they, too, might sign as early as October.²⁷ Reinforcing these prospects were the

²⁶ Yeltsin, Boris. *The Struggle for Russia* (New York: Times Books, 1994), p.26.

²⁷ Gorbachev and Presidential Council member Grigory Revenko (a top aide to Gorbachev on the New Union Treaty Process) differ somewhat in their accounts. Revenko has Azerbaijan possibly signing early and Turkmenistan declaring it would wait to sign with Ukraine. I take Gorbachev's published account to have more weight

results of a referendum that Gorbachev had held back in March 1991; over 70 percent of the USSR's population (excluding the six most separatist republics: the three Baltic states and Armenia, Georgia and Moldova) voted to preserve the USSR as a renewed federation. The New Union Treaty deal virtually done, Gorbachev left for vacation in Foros, a Black Sea resort in Ukraine's Crimea, on 4 August 1991.²⁸

The plotters of the August coup burst Gorbachev's bubble with a sledgehammer. On August 18, the Soviet vice president, prime minister and the heads of the KGB, Interior Ministry and Defense Ministry announced that the vacationing Gorbachev was incapacitated by illness and that they were introducing a state of emergency in the country. They did not, however, arrest their most prominent opponents and Russian president Boris Yeltsin led a heroic resistance to their efforts, issuing public appeals for people to disobey the coup-plotters and to take to the streets. As Valery Konavalev has noted—and this is an absolutely critical point—the military leadership grossly miscalculated in its estimation that its officers would support it in a bloody coup attempt.²⁹ Importantly, in justifying their moves, the disobedient commanders mostly cited their unwillingness to tolerate civilian carnage in an effort to seize the White House; few seemed to express great reservations about the act of seizure itself, or about the illegality of the coup. Thus while only a few tens of thousands showed up in Moscow to defend Yeltsin and democracy (just a fraction of Moscow's millions), this was enough to split the military and to cause key military figures like Pavel Grachev, Aleksandr Lebed, Yevgeny Shaposhnikov and Boris Gromov to disobey their orders. This forced Defense Minister Yazov to call off the attack on Yeltsin's "White House" as reports came in that the crowd outside it was growing and that three people had already died in a minor skirmish not far away from the Russian parliament.³⁰

In one fell swoop, then, the mutinous ministers undermined Gorbachev's laborious efforts to build the trust of the republics *and* shattered the military "stick" that he had brandished to keep his restive regions at the negotiating table and which he had held in reserve as a plan of last resort. Although Gorbachev furtively approached the military leadership in late 1991 and demurely "raised the possibility" of military intervention at this late date, by then new commanders were in place who realized that the coup had for the time being destroyed the unity of the

than Revenko's remarks in an interview. Interview with Revenko, 20 October 1993; Gorbachev 1995 v.2, p. 552.

²⁸ Gorbachev 1995 v.2, p.552.

²⁹ Konavalev, Valery, "Marshal Yazov: Triumf i tragediya odnogo predatel'stva (22.08.91)" in Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (ed.), *Radio svoboda: Avgust 19–21* (Moscow: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 1992), p. 195.

³⁰ Stepankov, V.G. and Ye.K. Lisov, *Kremlyevskiy Zagovor: versiya, sledstviya* (Moscow: izdatel'stvo "Ogonyek," 1992), p. 180.

army and therefore its ability to intervene effectively in such affairs. Ironically, therefore, an attempted military takeover allowed the USSR to dissolve without facing either Yugoslavia's bloody implosion or the tragedy of Tiananmen. But had these key "force ministers" been astute enough to realize that their own top commanders would not shed blood without firm orders from the Commander-in-Chief,³¹ Gorbachev looked poised to have also avoided violence, but saving his union as well.

But why was all of Gorbachev's strategizing necessary in the first place? Why was it that the union fell apart once the threat of coercion evanesced? Indeed, as many as nine republics had indicated that they may have been willing to sign the New Union Treaty at some point in the Fall of 1991, and this would clearly have been sufficient to preserve the USSR's existence. Indeed, the USSR could have survived with just Russia and a few other hangers-on. Indeed, the irreconcilable separatists, those six republics that had refused to participate in the Novo-Ogarevo process at all and boycotted the March 1991 referendum on the USSR, were tiny peripheral regions that were all ultimately dispensable to the Soviet Union (the Baltic states, Moldova, Georgia and Armenia). Yet something critically important changed in during the fall of 1991, and that something changed in Russia. Despite the fact that Russians themselves promised to dominate any future Soviet Union, and despite the fact that more than 70 percent of RSFSR citizens voted in a referendum to save this union, their leaders decided in the fall of 1991 to dispense with the USSR, essentially setting the other 13 union republics free. To provide a satisfactory explanation of the Soviet collapse, therefore, one absolutely must understand and account for the behavior of Russia. It is to this task that I now turn.

Russia: Toward a Leaner Union

Why in the world would Russia deliberately destroy the union that it dominated? This puzzle is particularly stark in light of the decade subsequent to the Soviet collapse, since Russia is widely regarded as harboring imperial ambitions and as being bent on restoring influence in the territory of its former empire. Some, including the last Soviet leader himself, have sought the answer in personality, positing that Yeltsin was bent on destroying the USSR from the beginning, lusting for revenge against his old Communist Party nemesis, Mikhail Gorbachev. I argue, however, that Russia remained committed to saving the union up until the very end. Yet, as the economic logic outlined at the beginning of this paper suggests, Russia had good reason to "renegotiate" the union so as to gain greater control over the resources that had been flowing liberally from Russia into the coffers of other republics. Indeed, almost any other Russian leader would have replicated the most important of Yeltsin's

³¹ Brian Taylor, Ph.D. dissertation, MIT, 1997.

seemingly idiosyncratic acts of defiance had the latter leader not squeaked into office in May 1990 on the third vote of a badly split republic legislature. But if I am right that Russia had no interest in destroying the union, and if I am right that we cannot simply attribute its actions to a vengeful Boris Yeltsin, how then can we explain why this most dominant of republics plunged its dagger into the back of the Soviet state in December 1991 by joining Belarus and Ukraine in declaring that the USSR “ceases to exist?” The answer is that Russia sought actually to bring down the USSR only when it became unmistakably clear that Ukraine would no longer truck with Gorbachev and the ilk of unions past, and that only the most radical measures held out any hope of keeping Ukraine in Russia’s orbit.

Russia was relatively rich compared to the Central Asian republics of the USSR, and its people dominated the union culturally. While the three Baltic republics were indisputably the most developed, Russia was among the most developed of the rest in terms of key indicators. For example, Russia’s retail commodity turnover in 1988 was 1,400 rubles per capita, significantly higher than Central Asia’s figures, which ranged between Kazakhstan’s 1,070 and Tajikistan’s 340.³² The Russian Republic boasted a population of more than 147 million, nearly triple that of Ukraine, the second most populous republic. In addition, some 25 million ethnic Russians lived in other Soviet republics. In terms of territory, Russia was about six times larger than its nearest rival, Kazakhstan.³³ As if this advantage were not already enough, the Soviet regime conducted many “Russification” initiatives over the years and overtly favored Russians to advance to the most sensitive posts. One listing of the 100 most powerful Soviet officials showed that in 1986 Russians occupied 46 percent more positions than their share of the population would have dictated.³⁴ Although such dominance gave it little reason to fear exploitation at the hands of other republics, the Soviet regime had handicapped Russia in certain key ways deriving from Lenin’s original determination to stamp out “bourgeois” Russian chauvinism. Russia thus lacked its own branch of the Communist Party, the Academy of Sciences and other key Soviet institutions, unlike the remaining republics. Most significantly, however, reliable analyses based on market valuation of transfers show that Russia was in fact a net *donor* to the rest of the union despite the other republics’

³² These data come from a database available from the author. Most economic data are from *Narodnoe Khozyaistvo* and demographic data are from the 1989 census as published by Eastview Publications, Minneapolis, MN.

³³ These data are from the 1989 USSR census, published by Eastview Publications.

³⁴ Rahr, Alexander G., *A Biographic Directory of 100 Leading Soviet Officials*, 3rd edition, March 1986 (Munich: Radio Liberty Research, RFE-RL). Five of the 100 listed were categorized as “nationality unknown,” most of which had Slavic names and one of whom was Arkady Volsky, a Russian.

claims of exploitation, primarily because it supplied oil and gas to them at far-below-market prices.³⁵

Close examination of Russian actions in 1990 and 1991 reveals that Russia was not simply following the whims of a vengeful leader and was not seeking surreptitiously to destroy the union. Instead, Russia sought to *restructure* the union to its advantage, aiming to prevent other republics from being a burden on the Russian economy. Importantly, these policies first appeared in 1990 with the introduction of republic-level elections, which suddenly rendered Russian leaders accountable to their own population. Clearly, Yeltsin himself was in no position to impose his personal will on the new parliament; he was fortunate enough just to squeak into office as the legislators took three rounds before voting him in as their country's leader by the narrowest of margins. When the Russian parliament shocked outside observers by adopting its own "Declaration of Sovereignty" on 12 June, most assumed that this was Yeltsin's own troublemaking initiative. Yet a Yeltsin with such a weak institutional power base was simply not able to ram a radical document through parliament, and the sovereignty declaration was in fact actively supported even by mainstream Communist Party members, including Vitaly Vorotnikov, Yeltsin's conservative predecessor as Russian leader who proposed it formally.³⁶ The Congress chose from several alternative drafts, ultimately adopting a compromise version that laid claim to all resources located on Russian territory. While it reserved Russia's right to secede, it explicitly stated that the purpose of the declaration was to be the basis of a "New Union Treaty" to preserve the USSR.³⁷

A closer examination even of the subsequent "War of Laws" between Yeltsin and Gorbachev reveals not an attempt to *destroy* the union, but a drive to *restructure* it in a way that was more advantageous to Russia. In the spring of 1990, when Gorbachev had responded to rising nationalism in many Soviet republics by proposing to conclude a New Union Treaty, Russia initially demanded that the republics conclude this treaty amongst

³⁵ Bahry, Donna, "The Union Republics and Contradictions in Gorbachev's Economic Reform," *Soviet Economy* v.7, no.3, 1991, pp. 215–255; William W. Hogan, "Oil and Gas in the Former Soviet Union: Market Impacts and Reform Challenges," working paper in the series of the Center for Business and Government, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., March 1993; and Robin A. Watson, "Interrepublic Trade in the Former Soviet Union: Structure and Implications," *Post-Soviet Geography* 1994, v. 35, no. 7, pp. 371–408. See also Oksana Genrikhovna Dmitrieva, *Regional'naya Ekonomicheskaya Diagnostika* (Saint Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Sankt-Peterburgskogo Universiteta Ekonomiki i Finansov, 1992).

³⁶ *Izvestia* May 23, 1990 p. 4; May 24, 1990, p. 2.

³⁷ For the declaration and other significant documents on the subject, see Eduard Bagromov (ed.), *K soizu suverennykh narodov: Sbornik dokumentov KPSS, zakonodatel'nykh aktov, deklaratsiy, obrashcheniy i presidentskykh ukazov, posvyahchennykh probleme natsional'no-gosudarstvennogo suvereniteta* (Moscow: Institut Teorii i Istorii Sotsializma TsK KPSS, 1991).

themselves, without any interference from the central government, rejecting Gorbachev's attempts to impose a treaty after bilateral negotiations with each republic. Russia's proposals favored keeping most important economic levers in the hands of the republics, although as the largest republic by far, Russia could thereby expect to have great influence on the policies of other republics. Its leaders generally wanted to relegate to the union such responsibilities as defense, energy, transportation and communications infrastructure.³⁸ Accordingly, Russia's government fought a bitter battle with the central government over how to reform the USSR economy. Thus shortly after Soviet Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov proposed his plan to move gradually to a "regulated market" in the Spring of 1990, Russian Prime Minister Ivan Silaev produced the famous alternative "500-Day Plan." While most media focused on differences in the envisioned pace of change, the real issue was that the 500-Day Plan gave much more policymaking authority to the republics. Gorbachev actually supported the Russian initiative for a time, but in the face of Ryzhkov's vehement opposition he resorted to a drawn-out attempt to merge the plans somehow, ultimately ensuring that virtually no reform was conducted in 1990–1991.

Anticipating such reluctance, the Russian leadership essentially sought to create a situation in which the Soviet "center" had no choice but to let the republics administer economic reform themselves by presenting Gorbachev with a *fait accompli*. This became the heart of the storied "War of Laws." First, on July 13, 1990, Russia practically liquidated the USSR banking system, the linchpin of the center's capacity to appropriate republic resources and to distribute them as it deemed fit.³⁹ Just one day later, Russia reiterated its sovereignty declaration's claim to all property located on Russian territory, this time going so far as to declare that any activity violating the sovereignty and "economic interests" of Russia was null and void even if it had been ordered by top Soviet organs. Nevertheless, even this resolution presumed that some property in Russia would be administered by Soviet organs after the proper agreements were reached.⁴⁰ Russia thus nullified a series of key deals with foreign investors that had not been cleared with Yeltsin's authorities.⁴¹ Russia also created a set of institutions of its own to control such activity, including a State Bank and licensing agencies.⁴² This whole time, of course, Russia was assuming that the USSR would be preserved, only with much more

³⁸ See, for example, *Vedomosti RSFSR* 1990, no. 4, pp. 81–83; and *Izvestia* 2 August 1990, p. 2.

³⁹ See *Vedomosti RSFSR* 1990, no. 6, p. 142. For an excellent account of the implications of this move, see Joel Hellman's chapter in Mark Kramer's forthcoming edited volume, *The Collapse of the Soviet Union*, expected 1999.

⁴⁰ *Vedomosti RSFSR* 1990, no. 7, pp. 147, 149.

⁴¹ *Vedomosti RSFSR* 1990, no. 10, pp. 173–174.

⁴² *Izvestia* August 21, 1990 p. 2; *Vedomosti RSFSR* 1990, no. 11, pp. 188–189.

economic autonomy granted to the republics, as envisioned by the 500-Day Plan.

While the failure of the 500-Day Plan provoked Yeltsin into making some vitriolic statements that many interpreted to mean that he intended to destroy the union, his most significant actions of 1991 all suggested that he knew public opinion did not want a breakup and that he was seeking only to restructure the union. In the March referendum that Gorbachev orchestrated, more than 70 percent of the Russian population voted to preserve the USSR. This same referendum approved the creation of a directly elected presidency, for which Yeltsin successfully campaigned in May and early June. Significantly, in his desire to garner public support, he did not oppose the union but instead trumpeted his ability to work with Gorbachev to produce an agreement on a New Union Treaty. While he said that Russia's sovereignty drive had brought real benefits, he cited the April 1991 Novo-Ogarevo accord's promise of a "Union of Sovereign States" as one of his three main achievements during his first year in office.⁴³ Thus, it is no surprise that by August 1991 Yeltsin was among the leaders that had promised to sign the New Union Treaty that Gorbachev had long sought in order to save his teetering multiethnic state.

Even more critically, when the August 1991 coup sent Soviet institutions reeling, Yeltsin refused to take the kind of actions that could have easily led to a more rapid dissolution of the union. For example, Russia is the only former Soviet republic *never* to have issued a declaration of independence.⁴⁴ Yeltsin met with Gorbachev and eight other republic leaders just two days after the coup had failed and declared that a New Union Treaty was still necessary, an opinion supported by Ruslan Khasbulatov, Russia's new Congressional speaker, in his speech to the first post-coup meeting of the USSR Supreme Soviet on August 26.⁴⁵ Russian leaders even resorted to threatening other republics not to leave the union. In the most infamous example of this, Yeltsin's office warned Ukraine on August 26 that Russia might lay claim to some of its Russian-populated territory should Ukraine decide to secede. At the same time, Russia made clear its determination not to let any other republic interfere with its own plans to conduct economic reform. With central shackles now decisively broken, Yeltsin and his new Prime Minister Gaidar announced a radical price liberalization that eventually took place in January 1992.

⁴³ Radio Russia 1110 GMT, June 1, 1991, FBIS-SOV-91-106 p. 71.

⁴⁴ Solchanyk, Roman. "Russia, Ukraine and the Imperial Legacy," *Post-Soviet Affairs* v. 9, no. 4, October–December 1993, pp. 337–365, p. 348.

⁴⁵ Gorbachev, Mikhail, *Zhizn' i reformy* (Moscow: Novosti, 1995) v.2, pp. 583–584; Gorbachev, Mikhail, *The August Coup: The Truth and the Lessons* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991) p. 50; *Byulleten' No.1 sovmeznogo zasedaniya soveta soyuza i soveta natsional'nostey*, Verkhovnyy Sovet SSSR, Vneocherednaya Sessiya, August 26, 1991, pp. 39–40.

This *economic* separatism notwithstanding, it was Ukraine's move to secede that forced Russia essentially to follow. In a 1 December 1991 referendum, Ukraine voted overwhelmingly to become an independent state over the objections of both Yeltsin and Gorbachev. Faced with this fact, Yeltsin calculated that the only way to keep Ukraine in *some* kind of a union was to destroy the old one and to create whatever Ukraine would agree to. "It would have been criminal to conclude a treaty on a union of republics without Ukraine," he declared just days after dissolving USSR institutions and creating the nebulous and non-binding Commonwealth of Independent States.⁴⁶ Russia thus destroyed the union in order to save it.⁴⁷

To fully explain the Soviet collapse, therefore, we must understand why Ukraine acted so decisively to secede in the fall of 1991. As with Russia, Ukraine's behavior largely follows the pattern described in the first pages of this article, although we will see that Russia's own behavior, ironically, played a large part in pushing Ukraine in this direction. This study now turns its attention to Ukraine.

Ukraine: Nationalism from Above

Even as late as 1989, only the staunchest of diaspora nationalists saw much chance of a strong Ukrainian separatist movement. Ukrainians, most observers wrote, were culturally very close to Russians, enjoyed great upward mobility in the Soviet system and showed little tendency to radicalism.⁴⁸ One reason for this misjudgment was the mistaken impression that nationalism comes primarily "from below" (from mass movements) more than "from above" (from political leaders). In fact, Ukraine provides an excellent example of how electoral pressures forced vote-hungry leaders to mobilize people for a secession drive based on cultural and economic facts, facts that would have long remained only *latent* in the political arena were it not for these leaders' activities. Separatism came to Ukraine from above.

Ukraine was a relatively rich republic with great reason to fear Russian exploitation by the late 1980s. While Ukraine began the 20th century as the "breadbasket of Europe," the Soviet government industrialized and urbanized the republic to levels roughly equal to Russia's. For example, Ukraine's retail commodity turnover in 1988 was at 1,210 rubles per capita, behind only the Baltic states, Belarus and Russia. Russia was only slightly ahead of Ukraine at 1,410 rubles per capita, and both were far ahead of most of Central Asia. In consumer goods production, Ukraine ranked even higher than Russia, and Ukraine was the fifth most urbanized

⁴⁶ *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* December 13, 1991, cited in Bohdan Krawchenko, "Ukraine: the politics of independence" in Bremmer and Taras 1993, p. 91.

⁴⁷ For then-Foreign Minister Kozyrev's account of this logic, see *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* 8, December 1992 p. 5.

⁴⁸ *Subtelny* 1988/1994, p. 532.

republic in the USSR as of 1989.⁴⁹ While many Ukrainians complained of Russian exploitation, Ukraine actually received a net subsidy from Russia in the form of underpriced energy supplies.⁵⁰ Moscow had, however, denied Ukraine control over allocation of these resources and virtually the entire Ukrainian economy.⁵¹ Ukrainians had many other historical reasons to fear Russian exploitation, however. Ukrainian historians reached back to 1654 to claim that Russia betrayed Ukraine by taking advantage of an alliance concluded in this year to subsume Ukraine into its empire.⁵² Others looked to the massive famine that many said Stalin intentionally engineered in the early 1930s to cripple Ukraine, killing at least four million in the process.⁵³ Furthermore, the Chernobyl tragedy of 1986 that devastated much of this republic, both psychologically and physically, was still prominent in the popular memory. There is evidence, therefore, not only that Ukrainians tended to identify with their own republic in important ways, but that this identity was largely bound up with distrust of Moscow-based government. But as of 1989, few ever expected their grievances to translate into a strong drive for secession.

The competitive parliamentary elections of 1990 did more than anything else to start Ukraine along the road to secession for two main reasons. First, they signaled the shift of true local power from the Communist Party (and therefore Moscow) to the new legislative organs within the republic. No longer a rubber stamp, parliament had an independent source of authority, the electorate. Ukrainian Communist Party leader Volodymyr Ivashko gave official sanction to this state of affairs when he resigned as the CPU's general secretary (ceding the post to his second secretary, Stanislav Hurenko) in June 1990, retaining the chairmanship of the republic's new legislature (the *Rada*) as his primary base of power.⁵⁴

Second, the elections of 1990 awakened republic leaders to the mobilizing potential of separatist claims. The nationalist movement in Ukraine had its origins in western Ukraine, which had the longest history outside of Russian rule. Mass demonstrations in support of nationalist issues, sometimes involving as many as 50,000–200,000 people, had taken place in the city of Lviv as early as 1988, and such demonstrations became

⁴⁹ Data come from Author's database.

⁵⁰ Bahry 1991; Hogan 1993; Watson 1994.

⁵¹ See Bohdan Krawchenko, "Ukraine: the politics of independence" in Ian Bremmer and Ray Taras (eds.), *Nations and Politics in the Soviet Successor States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993) pp. 75–98, p.87.

⁵² Alexander Motyl, *Dilemmas of Independence: Ukraine after Totalitarianism* (N.Y.: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1993), pp. 26–28.

⁵³ Simon, Gerhard. *Nationalism and Policy Toward the Nationalities in the Soviet Union: From Totalitarian Dictatorship to Post-Stalinist Society* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1991), p. 99.

⁵⁴ *Izvestia* June 23, 1990, p. 2.

commonplace in the capital of Kyiv in 1989.⁵⁵ At these rallies, however, people did not air demands for independence, as a rule, but decried the Chernobyl disaster, called for a restoration of the Ukrainian language and demanded investigation into the Great Famine.⁵⁶

Pulling together the disparate groups and individuals who were active in these demonstrations, the Popular Movement for Restructuring Ukraine held its founding congress on September 8–10, 1989. Commonly known as *Rukh* (which means “movement” in Ukrainian), it initially was not primarily a nationalist organization. At the founding congress, Rukh’s platform pledged to uphold the sovereignty of Ukraine, to promote the Ukrainian language and culture, to voice ecological concerns, to support democratization in society and politics and to promote solidarity among all ethnic groups in Ukraine.⁵⁷ Indeed, Rukh succeeded in building a reputation for ethnic moderation, reaching out to Russians and Jews in its programs and condemning Ukrainian chauvinism.⁵⁸

The approach of the March 1990 elections sparked an upsurge in Rukh’s activity as its leaders began campaigning to win public office. In early 1990, Rukh made its first major foray into mass mobilization, calling for citizens of Ukraine to form a vast “human chain” stretching from Kiev to Lviv on January 22, 1990, the anniversary of the Ukrainian People’s Republic’s declaration of independence in 1917.⁵⁹ Although reportedly not so successful as similar prior efforts in the Baltic republics, this event marked the emergence of Rukh as a formidable political force.⁶⁰ Rukh-dominated demonstrations became commonplace, often drawing well into the thousands. Candidates for the Rada and local councils appeared regularly at Sunday Rukh rallies in Kiev, and cries of “we want change” echoed at still other mass gatherings.⁶¹ By February 1990, Rukh had finally won official recognition by Ukrainian authorities, registering itself as a movement with the republic council of ministers. Rukh thereby gained the right independently to field its own candidates for elections, although many of its supporters had, of course, already been running, nominated by work collectives, educational institutions and the like.⁶² Although *Rukh* was denied access to the mass media during the March 1990 Rada election campaign, it still managed to garner a quarter of the seats based on

⁵⁵ Subtelny 1994, p. 576.

⁵⁶ Subtelny 1994, pp. 574–575.

⁵⁷ Subtelny 1994, p. 576.

⁵⁸ Motyl 1993, p. 81.

⁵⁹ Motyl 1993, p. 44.

⁶⁰ *Krasnaya Zvezda* January 23, 1990, p. 3, FBIS-SOV-90-021 January 30, 1990, p. 54.

⁶¹ Kiev in Ukrainian to North America, 2200 GMT, February 5, 1990, FBIS-SOV-90-035 February 21, 1990, pp. 86–87; Kiev in Ukrainian to North America, 2200 GMT, February 11, 1990, FBIS-SOV-90-030 February 13, 1990, p. 102; Kiev in Ukrainian to North America, 2200 GMT February 18, 1990, FBIS-SOV-90-040 February 28, 1990, p. 85.

⁶² *Izvestia* February 12, 1990, p. 3.

promises of national revival and it quickly allied with likeminded legislators outside the organization.⁶³

The forces of Rukh, suddenly finding themselves with an official forum from which to make claims, pushed separatist ones the farthest. If the movement had before been a cautious voice for increased autonomy, many of the movement's leaders began openly calling for outright secession immediately after the election. Serhii Odarych, a chief campaign organizer, put it bluntly: "The aim of Rukh is independence for Ukraine."⁶⁴ Leaders of the movement called Gorbachev's plans for a "renewed federation" hypocritical, and pressured the Communist Party of Ukraine to break with the USSR Party organization.⁶⁵ Ivan Drach, a Rukh leader, aimed directly at bringing down the union in order to achieve this: "The duty of Russia is to secede first and help others. A free Ukraine is impossible without a free Russia."⁶⁶

Rukh was not the only political force to discover that it could cultivate and harness its electorate's distrust of Moscow. Even the Communists radicalized their claims for autonomy during and after the election campaign. When the republic's Party leader, Ivashko, ran for the Rada chairmanship (before December 1991 the highest state post in the country) in May 1990, he stressed his opposition to separatism while voicing strong support for Ukrainian sovereignty. He now asserted that sovereignty meant the supremacy of Ukrainian law over Soviet law in Ukraine and Ukraine's status as an international actor in its own right.⁶⁷

The nature of the claims made by both the Communists and Rukh reflect the essentially economic nature of Ukraine's interests: the chief goal was the economic development of Ukraine, and Europe was a much more promising source of this than was Russia, which, as an imperial power, could not be trusted (if not because of ill intent, then because of incompetence) and which could not offer Ukraine significantly more "goods of modernity" than it already possessed in its own relatively advanced economy. Different Rukh leaders would cite different reasons why independence was needed, but one of the chief among them was the need to establish national institutions in order to protect Ukraine against Moscow, which was portrayed as not responding to the needs of Ukraine in making policy. Ukraine needed its own bank and its own currency as a

⁶³ Bojcun, Marko, "The Ukrainian Parliamentary Elections in March–April 1994," *Europe-Asia Studies* v. 47, no. 2, 1995, pp. 229–249, p. 229.

⁶⁴ Paris AFP in English, 1159 GMT, March 29, 1990, FBIS-SOV-90-056, March 22, 1990, p. 102.

⁶⁵ Paris AFP in English, 1451 GMT, March 12, 1990, FBIS-SOV-90-049, March 13, 1990, p. 104.

⁶⁶ *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, no. 15, April 11, 1990, p. 3, FBIS-SOV-90-081, March 26, 1990, pp. 109–111.

⁶⁷ Kiev International Service in English, 2300 GMT, May 29, 1990, FBIS-SOV-90-105 May 31, 1990, pp. 92–93.

form of protection before Ukraine could move decisively to a market economy, declared Vyacheslav Chornovil, the man becoming the most prominent opposition figure and the most important leader of Rukh.⁶⁸ In addition, Rukh leaders clearly had in mind integration into Western European society as opposed to the Russian-dominated one when considering secession from the USSR. Thus, in his run for leadership of the newly elected Rada in May 1990, Chornovil stated his platform thus: “I stand for the complete state independence of Ukraine as the only way out of the economic and spiritual catastrophe.” This would entail, among other things, the creation of a national currency in order to stop Moscow’s uncontrolled monetary emissions, the adoption of a market economy and the privatization of land. Critically, all of this was necessary, he said, as preparation for joining a “common European economic system.”⁶⁹

Surprisingly similarly, when the Communist Ivashko campaigned for the Rada presidency against Chornovil in May 1990, he reiterated the need for Ukrainian sovereignty and added that this now meant the supremacy of Ukrainian law over Soviet law in Ukraine (although still stressed that he opposed separatism). In addition, he said, Ukraine should be an international actor in its own right.⁷⁰ The Ukrainian Party’s supreme organ, the large Central Committee, adopted a resolution after the election outlining very similar goals.⁷¹

Ivashko and Communist Party documents indicate that these efforts reflected primarily economic aims. Thus, in his speech to the post-election plenary meeting of the Party’s Central Committee, Ivashko declared:

Social and economic policy of the Communist Party of the Ukraine should be aimed at building an effective economy, ensuring high living standards, maximum social and economic protection of the people. The Politburo considers that the strategic direction to achieve this goal is the republic’s transition to economic sovereignty and independence. This means first of all the Ukrainian people’s right of ownership of land, natural resources, mineral resources, forests, water basins, other natural wealth, and the main means of production, and also independence in determining the structure of the economy; forms and methods of economic management, and social production; the taxation policy; the distribution of the national product, and incomes; establishment of economic relations at the interrepublican and international levels.⁷²

⁶⁸ Kiev International Service in Ukrainian, 1800 GMT, May 28, 1990, FBIS-SOV-90-104 May 30, 1990, p. 103.

⁶⁹ Kiev International Service (English), 2300 GMT, May 30, 1990, FBIS-CHI-90-105, May 31, 1990, p. 93.

⁷⁰ Kiev International Service in English, 2300 GMT, May 29, 1990, FBIS-SOV-90-105 May 31, 1990, pp. 92–93.

⁷¹ *Pravda Ukrainy* April 3, 1990, p. 1, FBIS-SOV-90-087 May 4, 1990, p. 97.

⁷² Kiev International Service in English 2330 GMT, March 31, 1990, FBIS-SOV-90-063 April 2, 1990, pp. 107–108.

Ivashko was also clearly trying to avoid specific Moscow policies that were politically unpalatable at home. Most prominently, this meant the price hikes that the Ryzhkov's Soviet government had called for in the spring of 1990. Ivashko took one of the strongest stands against this policy among the leaders of all 15 republics.⁷³ Ivashko also declared that sovereignty was a way to eliminate the heavy-industry bias in the Ukrainian economy.⁷⁴ Far more than the nationalists, however, the Communists publicly worried about the loss of economic ties that might occur with separation. Thus Ivashko's vision was of a sovereign Ukraine in "mutually profitable relations with the other republics," which could only come about if the Soviet federation were turned into a real federation.⁷⁵

Evidence strongly suggests that the Communist line was very much in tune with public opinion in Ukraine in 1990. Despite their claims to represent the wishes of the people, even the Rukh leaders themselves explicitly recognized that they had outpaced public opinion in their suggestion of eventual secession: "Seriously, the national sentiment of our people is not on the level of, for instance, people in Lithuania," lamented the chief editor of Rukh's newspaper in April 1990.⁷⁶ In the union-wide referendum of March 1991, the Ukrainian people officially sided with their Communist leaders, supporting a continued USSR with 70 percent of the ballots.⁷⁷

By December, however, the same people had registered a 90 percent vote in favor of Ukrainian *independence*.⁷⁸ How can one explain this radical shift? A close examination of opinion poll data and concurrent events reveals that the change took place more at the level of elite politics than of mass public opinion. The key to understanding Ukrainian public opinion is its two-dimensional nature. Throughout 1990 and 1991 (and even for some time afterwards), Ukrainian citizens perceived an economic interest in staying in the union, but *only* if this union could guarantee no exploitation of Ukraine in the future. The two key dimensions, therefore, are perceptions of *possibility* and *probability*. The wording of Gorbachev's March 1991 referendum was absolutely critical in this regard:

Do you consider necessary the preservation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as a *renewed* federation of *equal* sovereign republics, in which the *rights and freedoms of the individual of any nationality are guaranteed in full measure*? Yes or No.

⁷³ *Izvestia* May 30, 1990, p. 1; *Pravda* May 29, 1990, p. 2, FBIS-SOV-90-103 May 29, 1990, pp. 138-139.

⁷⁴ *Pravda* May 3, 1990, p. 2, FBIS-SOV-90-087 May 4, 1990, p. 100.

⁷⁵ *Pravda Ukrainy* May 3, 1990, p. 2, FBIS-SOV-90-087 May 4, 1990, p. 100; *Pravda Ukrainy* May 10, 1990, p. 3.

⁷⁶ *Mlada Fronta* (Prague) April 5, 1990, p. 5, FBIS-SOV-90-070, pp. 126-127.

⁷⁷ *Izvestia* March 26, 1991, p. 3.

⁷⁸ Radio Kiev in English 5 December 1991, 0100 GMT, FBIS-SOV-91-234, p. 61.

I have italicized certain words to show how the Gorbachev question essentially asked them what *kind* of union they wanted, and the hypothetical one it proposed was not the existing union but an “ideal” one in which all fears of exploitation were allayed. If the Gorbachev question asked people about the ideal union they would prefer, the December 1991 Ukrainian question did not explicitly build in utopian images. It merely asked people:

Do you support the Act of the Declaration of the Independence of Ukraine?

Gorbachev’s center could not be trusted, and that given this fact, people had strong incentive to support secession. This argument becomes still stronger when we recognize that there was little “absolute” in the people’s understanding of the term “independence.” Indeed, it was Kravchuk himself who had declared that “only unity is the true path to independence” during the campaign for the March referenda that produced strong pro-union votes. Thus, generally speaking, the strongest popular support would have been found for a union in which all rights and national freedoms could be guaranteed. But since such a union was perceived as being highly unlikely, the population tended to support something called “independence,” which people did not necessarily believe would deprive them of important ties to the other Soviet republics.

This interpretation finds strong “micro-level” support in some remarkable polling data collected by Igor Burov’s independent sociological center *Poshuk* during the run-up to the referendum. In a fall 1991 survey, he asked people first whether they supported “the creation of an independent state of Ukraine,” to which query 71 percent answered “yes” and 15 percent said “no.” Later on, in the same questionnaire, he added the word “democratic” to the first question, asking respondents whether they supported “the creation of a democratic independent state of Ukraine.” This slight change in wording produced an 11 percent leap in support for Ukrainian independence, with 82 percent now replying “yes.” Not stopping here, after a few other questions had been asked, Burov proceeded to inquire whether people agreed, “It is necessary for Ukraine to become a member of a new Union.” Strikingly, only 31 percent disagreed. It must be stressed that this was *in the same survey*. Although only 46 percent agreed with this statement, this was half again the number of people that opposed it, and 22 percent replied that it was hard for them to say. This question was also asked without any of the “positive spin” language that had beautified Gorbachev’s question in March 1991. A few calculations add to the striking quality of the results: Burov’s survey reveals that *at least* 20 percent of the people were quite capable of expressing positive support for *both* a “new Union” *and* a “democratic independent state of Ukraine.” Put even more strongly, more than 50 percent of the people surveyed saw nothing to stop them from *both*

supporting an independent Ukraine *and* declining to oppose a new Union.⁷⁹

It is critical to note that I am *not* saying that *no* shift in Ukrainian public opinion occurred between March and December 1991. Important events in Moscow took place in the interim that rendered the Soviet Union a much riskier place for Ukraine but that simultaneously gave Ukrainian leaders a rare window of opportunity actually to secede. The August coup was the first such critical event. It finally convinced Ukrainian leaders that they could not be safe in a union, a fear that was easy to communicate to the masses even if they did not buy nationalist rhetoric of cultural revival. It showed that Gorbachev's promises were not reliable, since conservative feelings ran so strong that such forces were willing, and potentially able, to remove Gorbachev himself to achieve their aims if need be. Crucially, the failure of this coup attempt presented to Ukraine a unique chance to seize the day—the military was divided and decapitated, and Russian President Boris Yeltsin's bold resistance to it had thrown nearly all central institutions into disarray. If there was ever a chance for Ukraine to win its independence, this was it.

In defeating the coup, however, Yeltsin's Russia seemed to many observers to be bent on taking over Soviet institutions for itself, essentially cutting other republics out of the most important decisionmaking processes. Boosted by new power realities and the new moral authority deriving from Yeltsin's heroic stand, Russia's representatives dominated the new temporary institutions set up to govern the USSR. For example, Yeltsin's Prime Minister, Ivan Silaev, became the head of the new temporary government. While Kravchuk did not trust Gorbachev, these events gave cause for him to trust the seemingly unpredictable and volatile Boris Yeltsin even less. Thus, at a press conference on 30 August 1991, the Ukrainian leader called attention to the post-putsch "euphoria" in Russia and the attendant "exaggeration of the merits of some one individual or one people." He pointedly declared:

This is already taking concrete forms. Let's say [that] all state structures should be based on the Russian ones and that the cadres should only be Russian. You see that now a committee has been formed headed by [Russian Prime Minister Ivan] Silaev and other representatives of Russia. Right now I do not want to pass judgment on the work of this committee, but as chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Ukraine I have my doubts whether this committee, which is composed of representatives of one republic, can defend the interests of other republics.⁸⁰

As Yeltsin laid claim to Soviet central institutions and as Kravchuk responded with the rapid establishment of Ukrainian independence,

⁷⁹ Burov, Igor. Survey of residents of Ukraine conducted by the Ukrainian Independent Center of Sociological Research "Poshuk" in the fall of 1991.

⁸⁰ *Sil'ski Visti* September 4, 1991, p. 1, quoted in Solchanyk 1993, pp. 350–351.

tensions between their two republics began to escalate. On August 26, two days after Ukraine's declaration of independence, Yeltsin's press secretary stated that if Ukraine followed through on independence, Russia might lay claim to certain of its regions dominated by Russian-speakers. Russian vice president Aleksandr Rutskoi then led a Russian delegation to Ukraine, the purpose of which Yeltsin said was "to tell the Ukrainian people: If you stay in the union we will not make territorial claims."⁸¹

Equally importantly, all this took place as Ukraine was gearing up for presidential elections scheduled for December, elections that had been planned even before the August coup attempt.⁸² These presidential elections gave Kravchuk added incentive to feel out the contours of his republic's opinion structure, aligning himself with what now seemed to be a clear republic interest in secession. The race pitted several candidates against each other, but the main contest was between Kravchuk and the Rukh leader and president of the Lviv legislature, Vyacheslav Chornovil. Tellingly, all of the other major candidates were on the nationalist side of the political spectrum, and none of them approached the appeal of Chornovil. After a hard-fought campaign, Kravchuk won handily, garnering more than 60 percent of the ballots cast, with Chornovil netting just 23 percent.⁸³ On one hand, his victory, which occurred on the same day as Ukraine's independence referendum, was a triumph for separatism and the declaration of independence, since he had championed both in his campaign.⁸⁴ On the other hand, it could also be interpreted as a call for moderation—if the Ukrainian population had really wanted a complete break with Russia and the USSR, it could have followed most western Ukraine voters in opting for the man (Chornovil) who had supported such a policy much more consistently over the previous two years.

In this light, then, the shift in public opinion that took place in Ukraine between March and December 1991 is best seen as more a change in risk calculation than a sudden radical assertion of national will. Even so, this shift did not simply "happen;" it would be more accurate (if less concise) to describe the August coup and Russia's subsequent provocative moves as providing Ukrainian politicians with important symbolic resources that were then used to convince their constituents that any future union represented a grave threat to Ukraine's economic security. Polling data indeed suggest that support for the independence option grew (if only by a few percentage points) between August and December 1991, and that Ukrainian politicians took the lead in mobilizing this shift. Indeed, Burov's poll results strongly suggest that a referendum question worded similarly to the March 1991 query would have won a similar level of support even in the fall of 1991, after the coup. Kravchuk and his team

⁸¹ Solchanyk 1993, pp. 351–353.

⁸² *Vedomosti USSR* 1991, p. 848.

⁸³ Motyl and Krawchenko in Bremmer and Taras (eds.) 1997, p. 269.

⁸⁴ Marples 1993, p. 42.

had been steadily exploring the contours of Ukrainian opinion on the issue of the union ever since the Rada elections of 1990. In the wake of the coup, they were keen enough observers to have known not only that they *could* persuade the people to back independence. Even more critically, they had to have realized that if they did not do so, their political opponents certainly would. While this “latent” shift in public opinion in favor of separatism was not of earth-shaking proportions, it was enough to convince previously uncertain Ukrainian leaders that secession was now a winning political strategy. Kravchuk himself therefore sought out to craft Ukrainian independence on his own terms, and proved successful. Somewhat ironically, however, he won his separatist victory, defeating his even more staunchly independence-minded competitors, because he could most credibly *also* be seen as a defender of the “first dimension” of Ukrainian public opinion, which still remained strong as shown above: the desire to benefit from continued economic ties to Russia.

The Failure to Form a Rump Union: Central Asia and the CIS

Why did no “rump Soviet Union” form after Ukraine seceded? If Russia really did want to save the union in some form, then it would have seemed natural to salvage at least a loose confederation with other willing states. And while the separatist firebrands (notably Ukraine, the Baltic countries and Georgia) attracted most of the media attention, a relatively large number of important republics did voice their readiness to cooperate closely with Russia. The Central Asian states topped the list of prospective partners, expressing surprise and even dismay at their sudden confrontation with independent statehood.

I argue, however, that this apparent convergence of unionist interests was only illusory, that the kind of unions desired by Russia and Central Asia were in fact quite different and nearly mutually exclusive, although common ground did exist. The Central Asian republics, lagging far behind Russia in most indicators of economic development, were eager to stay in the union so as to preserve economic ties and, critically, subsidies from Moscow. Yet Russia had been consistently trying to weaken the USSR precisely so as to *avoid* subsidizing other republics. Both sets of republics also struggled for control over the levers of power in any rump union—Russia sought to avoid losing a handle on its delicate economic reform process and Central Asia sought to protect itself against the sometimes dangerous whims of Russia’s radical government. In the pages that follow, I will focus primarily on Uzbekistan as representative of general Central Asian attitudes to the USSR, although I will refer to other cases, especially the critical republic of Kazakhstan, where appropriate.

Examination of Uzbekistan’s leaders’ actions and statements in 1990–1991 makes quite clear that Uzbekistan was ready for a national revival

and that it wanted more autonomy than it had been granted by Gorbachev's predecessors, but that it backed away from actual secession precisely because of its poverty and in the hope that it would yet benefit from ties to the rest of the union. Indeed, Uzbekistan was among the very poorest of the 15 Soviet republics, as a variety of statistics demonstrate. For example, just 41 percent of its population lived in urban areas as of 1989. Its retail commodity turnover, a good indicator of living standards, was just 760 rubles per capita, far below Ukraine's at 1,210 and Russia's at 1,400. In this, Uzbekistan is representative of the rest of Central Asia, although Kazakhstan also contained an industrialized north, populated primarily by ethnic Russians, that tended to lift some of its statistical economic averages up closer to those of Russia.

Instead of looking to the past in order to ascribe blame, Uzbekistan's leaders saw a reformed Soviet Union as its best chance of escaping its poverty and dependency in the years ahead. As Uzbek President Islom Karimov put it in an interview with a German publication in March 1991:

After sober analysis of the situation in Uzbekistan, however, we have come to the view that our republic's best prospects lie in a renewed federation. I would like to give you just two figures: The per-capita national income in Uzbekistan is not only three times lower than in the Baltic states, but it is also only half of the union average. The republic has a completely underdeveloped, one-sided economy. We are mainly deliverers of raw material, and even the existing processing industry provides mostly only intermediate products. A total of 92 percent of all Uzbek cotton fibers are not processed in our country. On the other hand, we have to import more than half of the goods needed by the population.⁸⁵

Uzbekistan, therefore, actively sought greater autonomy in order to restructure its economy, but unlike Ukraine, it never sought outright secession since it saw ties with the USSR as a ticket to advancement. Thus Uzbekistan joined all republics in declaring sovereignty in 1990, yet unlike Ukraine and Russia, the draft New Union Treaty that it submitted to Gorbachev's working group in the fall differed very little from the version Gorbachev drafted.⁸⁶ Not surprisingly, Karimov handily orchestrated a 90 percent vote for the union in Gorbachev's referendum of March 1991. Karimov did strongly object to Gorbachev's attempts to impose the treaty on the republics based only on bilateral negotiations, but he was easily accommodated when Gorbachev decided to negotiate the treaty directly with all willing republic leaders as part of the Novo-Ogarevo process in April 1991. Accordingly, Uzbekistan's parliament approved the basic propositions of the latest draft treaty on June 13, 1991, and confirmed that a delegation to be led by Karimov would negotiate the details further and

⁸⁵ *Berliner Zeitung* March 5, 1991, p. 3 FBIS-SOV-91-051, pp. 84-86.

⁸⁶ Draft New Union Treaty drawn up by Uzbekistan, original document in possession of the author, 1990.

would sign it.⁸⁷ During August 1991, Uzbekistan declared its intent to be among the initial signatories of the New Union Treaty, slated to be formally concluded that same month.⁸⁸

The Moscow coup attempt of August 18 did prompt Uzbekistan's parliament to proclaim independence, but legislators did not intend this to mean a complete break with Soviet structures, especially economic ones. The declaration of independence itself called for a "unified economic space in the Union" and stated that Uzbekistan would participate in the creation of a collective security force and in the maintenance of the strategic troops of the USSR.⁸⁹ In fact, the Uzbek-language word that Karimov chose for "independence" (*mustaqillik*) was the same word he had used to declare the much less radical concept of "sovereignty" back in the summer of 1990 even though other possibilities were available. Although Russian versions of the declaration reflected the distinction between the two concepts and thereby mirrored the terminology used in all other republics that so declared, the Uzbek-language choice fits well with a desire not to alarm the Uzbek-speaking population. Thus, while Ukrainian leaders took advantage of terminological ambiguity to *bolster* their secession drive, the Uzbek ones used it to push in the other direction. Indeed, as the fall of 1991 wound down, Karimov remained a strong supporter of a decentralized union.

Referring back to the above discussion of Russian behavior in the union, it is clear that the Central Asian desire for continued or even expanded support did not mesh easily with Russia's desire to extricate itself from financial obligations outside its borders. But while few republics were completely satisfied with Gorbachev's metropole, these central Soviet institutions wielded the power to engage in logrolling and otherwise to cajole each republic into accepting some form of compromise for the sake of what was perceived as the common good. Republics were willing to give up some of their "first choice" demands just so as to avoid the unnecessary costs of transition that the collapse of the union would involve. Conservatism, then, worked in favor of the union before late 1991, and this held Central Asia and Russia together. Now that the USSR had collapsed, however, conservatism increasingly pushed in the opposite direction. The damage of the dissolution had been done, the costs had been imposed. In this context, then, divergent interests in integration took on a much greater significance.

Two major Russian interests (one geopolitical and the other economic) clashed with Central Asian interests in the CIS, ultimately combining to ensure that no truncated union formed in the wake of the Soviet collapse throughout the 1990s. First, since Ukraine was perceived to be a much

⁸⁷ *Vedomosti USSR* 1991, no. 8, p. 194.

⁸⁸ Revenko interview.

⁸⁹ *Vedomosti USSR* 1991, no. 11, pp. 68–69.

more valuable partner than Central Asia, Russia took a gamble by holding the latter at bay in an effort to win the trust of the former in the CIS. Public opinion polling in Russia shows that Russians as a whole regarded the Central Asian republics as among the least desired integration partners and Ukraine as the most attractive.⁹⁰ Agreeing with Yeltsin's statement that he could not conceive of a union without Ukraine, Russian leaders feared, with justification, that any quick Russian moves to consolidate a "rump union" immediately after signing the CIS treaty would have only served to justify Ukraine's suspicion that Russia was still bent on restoring its old empire, albeit in a new guise. With a year's hindsight, Yeltsin's Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev described his team's reasoning: "The pivotal moment became the Ukrainian referendum. Before Russia the dilemma arose: either we recognize the independence of Ukraine as a completed fact (whether we liked it or not was not important), or we oppose that independence." This latter option, he said, would have meant calling in the army. Given this situation, "a USSR without Ukraine or a CIS without Ukraine would signify, in any case for the leadership of Ukraine, that this is a union directed against Ukraine."⁹¹ Thus, Russia spurned the Central Asian states in the vain hope of winning what it saw as a greater prize, but as was demonstrated above, this hope was seriously misplaced.

The second major Russian interest that clashed with Central Asian ambitions involved economics. As is documented above, Russia consistently sought to stem the outflow of funds going to other republics as a form of subsidy. Public opinion research demonstrates that this policy had strong support in the Russian population at large, as people tended to support integration projects (even with other Slavic states like Ukraine) only if this would not cost them anything.⁹² The power of this Russian interest is evident in the fact that Russia itself was the one to destroy the Ruble Zone, the set of former Soviet territories where the ruble was the primary currency. Once the Soviet Union broke up, the Ruble Zone represented a serious threat to the Russian economy in two ways. First, it encouraged inflation since each newly independent government gave itself the power to issue unlimited amounts of ruble credits, which could then be used to buy goods in other republics. Russia eliminated this problem in the summer of 1992 by imposing a strict system of mutual accounting in trade. Second, the Ruble Zone became a massive source of subsidies for the member republics. According to a report drafted by Western technical advisors for the Russian government,⁹³ Russia was providing over 27 percent of its total cash emissions to the republics that remained in the Ruble Zone in 1992, and by the first quarter of 1993, this

⁹⁰ Data from VTsIOM polling database. Poll taken in January 1993.

⁹¹ *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* December 8, 1992, p. 5.

⁹² RFE/RL Daily Reports, no. 70, April 13, 1994.

⁹³ In possession of the author.

figure had leapt to 55 percent, although it dipped again to 29 percent for the second quarter. In fact, Russian cash transfers to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan amounted to 45–70 percent of these countries' GDP according to one estimate and were the main means used to pay their workers' wages. During the course of 1993, Russia steadily pushed these republics out of the Ruble Zone, even though Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Belarus and Armenia had proven willing to sign away virtually the entire control over their economies to Russia in the Ruble Zone of a New Type treaties of 1993, which called for member states to contribute gold, hard currency and other highly liquid bank assets to help back the ruble *and* to abide not only by Russia's credit, emissions and banking policies, but also its overall economic, budget, trade and customs policies.

In the end, this and similar Russian moves essentially forced Central Asia and the other unionist republics to build up their own institutions of independent statehood in a way that made them ever more reluctant to reintegrate with Russia. As argued above, Russia's moves compelled them to discover that the unthinkable was in fact thinkable, that their own regimes could survive the break in ties with Russia intact. Gradually, integration became the great unknown and separation the familiar commodity. The conservative path, therefore, became the path of independence. Even more importantly, however, some of these republics launched out on programs designed explicitly to reduce their own dependence on Russia. Most notably, Karimov aggressively developed newly discovered oil reserves and built a refining capacity that enabled Uzbekistan to escape its reliance on Russian energy supplies by 1996 *en route* to becoming a significant exporter. Not surprisingly, at just this time, Uzbekistan moved away from its time-tested unionism to blaze a decisively separatist path vis-à-vis Russia. Suddenly Karimov was balking at even the most trivial of CIS agreements that he had considered uncontroversial before.

The Commonwealth of Independent States was born of chaos, and in chaos it remained. Negotiators worked tirelessly to produce agreements that satisfied not only the unionists, but also Ukraine and the fiscally conservative forces within Russia itself. The result, however, was only to bring the CIS down to the level of coherence favored by separatist states like Ukraine, rendering its institutions extremely weak. Although it generated seemingly countless agreements, few were actually implemented, and the CIS, as of 1993, was widely regarded as merely a means for a "civilized divorce," regulating the process of disintegration and avoiding Yugoslavia's path to dissolution.⁹⁴ Although some progress was made in the area of security cooperation, notably peacekeeping

⁹⁴ Legvold, Robert. "Foreign Policy," in Timothy J. Colton and Legvold (eds.), *After the Soviet Union: From Empires to Nations* (N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), pp. 85–112.

operations in Georgia and Tajikistan, the direction that appeared most promising as the twentieth century drew to a close was that of creating a free market of goods and services across much of former Soviet Eurasia. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan had joined Russia and Belarus in a kind of “mini-CIS” devoted primarily to forming a customs union, for which all voiced strong support. Even here, however, complications arose. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan also belonged to a Central Asian customs union project that excluded Russia but included Uzbekistan, a situation that would eventually force them to choose partners so long as Uzbekistan continued to refuse to join any customs union agreements involving Russia. Nevertheless, a core group within the CIS was starting to congeal around this very limited, and relatively cost-free, goal of creating a free market.⁹⁵ By the end of the 1990s, therefore, even the “geopolitical” forces in Russia were compelled to think in terms of years and even decades when contemplating CIS integration.

The final piece has thus been added to the puzzle of the Soviet collapse. When Gorbachev first decided to democratize the USSR, he did not realize the inherent fragility of this union. Key republics like Ukraine were at least roughly as developed economically as Russia, and democratization, combined with historically rooted distrust and clumsy initial Soviet policymaking, drove them to try to secede and thereby avert any possibility of Russian exploitation. The Soviet leader nearly managed to achieve the improbable, allaying Ukraine’s security concerns and convincing it to remain in a reformed USSR voluntarily, but the plotters of the August coup in one fell swoop demonstrated irreversibly that Soviet governments could not be trusted and split the military forces that were Gorbachev’s last hope of keeping the union together. Although both Russia and Central Asia appeared to agree on the need to integrate even after Ukraine had opted out, this consensus proved illusory. Central Asia wanted a union, but one where it would receive subsidies and retain significant control over union economic policy. Russia wanted a union, but one where it would not provide subsidies and would not relinquish any control over its own economy. A compromise was possible early on, but Russia sacrificed this opportunity in order to convince Ukraine that it had given up its imperial ambitions in what proved to be the unrequited hope that Ukraine would soon return to the unionist fold. In struggling to save their union, therefore, Yeltsin, Gorbachev and the plotters of the August coup reaped only its ruin.

⁹⁵ For what will likely become the definitive work on CIS economic integration in the 1990s, see the forthcoming Ph.D. dissertation in Political Science by Keith Darden, University of California at Berkeley, expected 1999.

Conclusion: Lessons of the Soviet Collapse

By virtue of the situation that has taken shape with the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, I am ending my activity in the post of USSR President. I take this decision for reasons of principle. I have firmly spoken out for self-sufficiency, the independence of peoples and for the sovereignty of the republics. But simultaneously for the preservation of the union state, the integrity of the country. Events have taken another path.⁹⁶

When a glum Gorbachev uttered these words of resignation in the December of 1991, he ushered in a new world of uncertainty and opportunity, a world with 15 new states and with only one global superpower. He also left behind lessons for future leaders. Although many would see in his life actions to avoid, his strategy of trust-building and institutional creation offers hope to societies struggling to survive united. The Soviet Union took its place on the ash heap of history, although more due to the caprice of contingency than to the feckless failure of a single man. And while serendipity demands its due, human experience offers us the opportunity to learn and to create better chances for ourselves in times to come. Although we must not unthinkingly apply “lessons” from one situation to another, neither must we assume that what fails at one juncture in time will necessarily fail at another. The goal is to identify in the frothy brew of history patterns of behavior that can guide us in our future choices of drink. To conclude this article, therefore, it is worth speculating on what the epic collapse of the USSR has to teach us. The lessons are important and should impact how we cope with national tensions in states as different as Bosnia and China.

Although I have argued that ethnofederalism was part of the problem in the USSR, the international community often presents it as a *solution* to ethnic conflicts in war-ravaged states like Bosnia.⁹⁷ Does the Soviet experience teach us that this advice is misguided? Is ethnofederalism a way to build trust in a democratizing society, or does it just create centrifugal forces that will inevitably rend a teetering union asunder? The lessons of the Soviet collapse are not so simple. But while this event does not lend itself to blanket prescriptions, it does suggest the importance of considering two factors that determine when ethnofederalism promises to be source of unity, not instability. The first factor is the pattern of relative wealth among key ethnic regions and the second is leadership. Indeed, the most important lesson of the Soviet collapse may be that strong and creative leadership can potentially save even the most unstable multinational states, but that this process is difficult and fraught with peril.

⁹⁶ Gorbachev, Mikhail, *Zhizn' i reformy* (Moscow: Novosti, 1995) p. 5.

⁹⁷ For encouraging me to think about these issues, I am particularly grateful to Jack Snyder.

If we want to predict whether a given ethnofederation will survive democratization, we must first and foremost examine how its regions stack up to each other economically. Ethnofederations are most stable when they contain one relatively rich hegemonic ethnic region attached to a series of smaller and poorer ones that will cling to it for the sake of their economies. All evidence suggests that the USSR would have survived had it contained just Russia and a set of Central Asian republics. This bodes well for China, where the vast majority of its ethnic regions are significantly poorer than the national average and have strong incentive to look to China's booming coastal regions for their future development.

Other historical examples appear to bear this out, including Russia itself. Although the Russian Federation contains mostly Russian-dominated *oblasts*, it is also home to more than 30 ethnically defined republics and autonomous regions that together occupy 53 percent of Russian territory. Some of these national regions have no real hope of ever actually seceding, since they are completely surrounded by Russian territory. Others, however, do lie on Russia's periphery and could meaningfully secede. Virtually all republics in this peripheral set ranked lower than the Russian average for the years 1988–1989 in key indicators of economic development, such as retail commodity turnover, the volume of services and the number of doctors per capita.⁹⁸ Factors other than relative wealth certainly came into play, of course, and should also be considered when evaluating the stability of a given ethnofederal state. Some of these regions had so little institutional autonomy to begin with that it was very difficult for them to mount separatist claims.⁹⁹ In many cases, the “native” groups themselves had assimilated into the surrounding cultures quite extensively, reducing for them the fear of exploitation at the hands of Russia. As I have found in a statistical analysis of 45 of the USSR's ethnic regions, including those within Russia, both of these additional factors (institutional autonomy and assimilation) help us explain why Russia's own republics did not follow Ukraine and the Baltic states in lunging for independence. Yet this same statistical analysis also suggests that the economic factors were also quite important in keeping the Russian Federation together in the way I just argued.¹⁰⁰ Thus even highly nationally aware republics like Tuva backed away from demanding outright secession despite a history of independence and anti-Russian violence, and I think it is more than coincidental that Tuva was

⁹⁸ The main exceptions (among the republics, the units of highest rank) on these three indicators are Yakutia, Karelia, the Komi Republic, and Kabardino-Balkaria.

⁹⁹ For an excellent analysis of how such “institutional resources” affected ethnic mobilization in Russia's republics, see Dmitri Gorenburg's doctoral dissertation in Political Science at Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., expected 1998. My own statistical work also bears out this hypothesis—see my “Parade of Sovereignities: Testing Theories of Secession in the Soviet Setting,” *British Journal of Political Science*, forthcoming 1998.

¹⁰⁰ Author.

also one of the least economically developed regions of the USSR and was hence dependent on Russia for its economic future. Chechnya, of course, stands out as the main exception, although even it did in fact count among the most *moderate* republics before Djokhar Dudaev, a Soviet general, seized power there illegally in 1991 and galvanized his support when Moscow bungled a military attempt to remove him, events reminding us that leadership and provocation still matter.

But what of ethnofederations that are not so fortunate, that contain an unstable constellation of national republics? For a state that is about to democratize, the Soviet experience does strongly warn against creating ethnofederal institutions where none existed before. The USSR fell apart when democratic elections forced vote-seeking politicians to outbid each other for support in explicitly ethnic “homelands,” a process that drove primarily the richest ones to try to secede and poor ones to cling to the union. This competition also compelled Russian leaders to seek a greater position for Russia within the USSR, a process evoking fears of exploitation in the other republics. The “security dilemma” spiral accelerated as the rich republics’ separatist demands in turn provoked a harsher stance among some vocal segments of the Russian polity, which in turn only strengthened the restive regions’ resolve.

Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia also collapsed along this same pattern. In neither case was there a wealthy, hegemonic region with the economic power to induce poorer partners to overcome their fears of exploitation in the union and the political power sufficient to remove any fears of exploitation by other ethnic groups. Although the Serbs were the most powerful group in Yugoslavia numerically, few have called them hegemonic in the way that Russians were in the USSR. In any case, Serbia was also less developed than the key republics of Slovenia and Croatia, and it was precisely these two wealthiest ethnic regions that led the separatist charge, while the poorer regions of the country tended to remain unionist. Susan Woodward documents this claim in her excellent book on the disintegration of Yugoslavia, concurring that political leaders in the poorest ethnic republics had good economic incentives not to raise grievances against the central government.¹⁰¹ The surge to secession of the rich republics ultimately plunged Yugoslavia into a civil war, the implications of which have still not played themselves out. In Czechoslovakia, the situation was more complex since it has frequently been stated that the somewhat poorer Slovaks initiated the break-up. More rigorous analysis of events, however, has recently pointed to the Czechs as the initiator of the union’s demise. Like Russia in the USSR, the Czech government (led by Vaclav Klaus) sought to end the situation whereby the Czechs were essentially subsidizing the Slovak economy at a

¹⁰¹ Woodward, Susan L., *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution after the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1995) pp. 349–352.

time when the Czech Republic needed fiscal discipline for the sake of successfully implementing marketizing reforms. In the end, the Czechs (who, unlike the Russians, were not numerous enough to escape a security threat from other groups) ultimately pushed the Slovaks out of the union, since the latter would not agree formally to surrender most key economic levers to Klaus's government.¹⁰²

History does suggest some means by which such states might still survive the process of democratization. Nehru "federalized" India's budding democracy along ethno-linguistic lines in the early 1950s, and succeeded in keeping the country together largely by harshly enforcing a ban on all secessionist activity.¹⁰³ Yugoslavia, however, represents the negative example of this policy, as Slovenia and then Croatia balked at Slobodan Milosevic's threats to use troops to preserve the union. A third-party guarantee of ethnic group security might also facilitate the transition to democracy in an ethnofederation, as the architects of the Bosnian peace plan have hoped. Yet the problem, as Chaim Kaufman has pointed out, comes when this third party finally leaves the locals to their own devices. This departure creates much of the same kind of uncertainty about the future that drove Yugoslavia's richest republics to secede in the first place.¹⁰⁴ A common external threat might similarly force fearful ethnic regions to stick together as they democratize, but it is equally likely that this external threat would attempt to manipulate the potentially separatist groups as part of a "divide and conquer" strategy, or more importantly, that one group might fear that the other group has already become just such an "agent." Leaders might also seek to dismantle their own ethnofederal institutions, but this is likely to politicize the very thing they are seeking to depoliticize—ethnicity. Indeed, even at the very apogee of Soviet power, national groups sometimes invited certain reprisals by publicly protesting much more minor changes in ethnic group status.

Yet Mikhail Gorbachev demonstrated that creative leadership can still overcome the inherent vulnerability of ethnofederal states in the face of democratization, largely by providing security guarantees to groups by building both trust and institutions. More by political instinct than grand design, the first and last Soviet president developed such a strategy to assuage the security concerns of his richest republics and thereby nearly saved his union. Although he had largely written off the steely separatists of the Baltic region, he had actually managed to forge an agreement that all of the most important republics were on track to sign, indicating the

¹⁰² On this point, see Abigail Innes, Ph.D. dissertation in political science, M.I.T., 1997.

¹⁰³ Brass, Paul R, "Language and National Identity in the Soviet Union and India," in Alexander J. Motyl (ed.), *Thinking Theoretically about Soviet Nationalities: History and Comparison in the Study of the USSR* (N.Y.: Columbia University Press), pp. 99–128. I am also grateful to Steven Wilkinson for discussions on this subject.

¹⁰⁴ Kaufmann, Chaim. "Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars," *International Security* v. 20, no. 4, Spring 1996, pp. 136–175.

great promise of this policy direction. What, then, was this “Gorbachev model” of ethnofederal reform leadership? Above all, he had to build trust. But the necessary materials, needless to say, were in no great surplus in the late Soviet era. Indeed, political activists at just this time first found the freedom to investigate and publicize national grievances of the Soviet past. In part this meant that Gorbachev had to assure republic leaders and publics that he took their concerns seriously and was not out to trick them. But it also required the creation of new political institutions that made each republic unlikely to face exploitation in the future.

The Gorbachev model thus required attention to both *process* and *product*. The process had to begin with the *recognition* that each republic was in fact sovereign, that it had the right to decide its own fate. The process thus had to be *inclusive* and to engage directly the top elected decisionmakers of the republics, above all the presidents, in order to avoid the perception that this was something imposed on them from above. The process also had to be *predictable*—Gorbachev sought to institute a series of laws channeling separatist pressures and, more importantly, making Moscow’s responses to insubordination appear fair and foreseeable rather than exploitative and arbitrary. The process also had to be *tacitly enforced*. While any massive use of military might threatened to torpedo the whole trust-building project, Gorbachev still wanted the republics to know that he *could* call in the troops as a last resort should they leave the bargaining table altogether, or should they exceed other boundaries of civil behavior. This could never be spoken directly lest it undermine the recognition of sovereignty—it could only be implied. These four elements (recognition, inclusiveness, predictability and tacit enforcement) represent the delicate balance Gorbachev sought to strike in the process of negotiating the “new union.”

The *product* of the negotiations, however, was equally important: a new set of Soviet institutions that would have restricted the central government’s opportunity to exploit and would have empowered republics to defend their own interests in case of a breakdown. The Gorbachev model first and foremost granted the republics great autonomy to set their own economic policies, including methods of taxation and regulation. This meant that the republics, not the central government, controlled the key levers by which Moscow had exercised control in the past, reducing the possibility that it could do so again without the republics’ consent. To this end, Gorbachev also sought to give the republics the genuine right to secede, making real what Stalin’s constitution had falsely promised. If the republics could be convinced that they *could* secede anytime they saw fit, they would be much more likely to stay in the union in the first place. Gorbachev thus pointedly refrained from force in dealing with Armenia, the only “hard-core” separatist republic consciously to follow the 1990 law on secession. In addition, Gorbachev’s model gave the republics independent access to the

international arena, allowing them their own representation in foreign capitals and the right to establish their own direct foreign economic relations. In pushing such a decentralized “product,” therefore, the Soviet leader focused far into the Eurasian horizon, confident that economic interests would eventually draw the republics more tightly together of their own accord if only he could sustain their trust. In fact, the process and product of these negotiations reinforced each other quite nicely—by agreeing to and even proposing institutions that empowered the republics, Gorbachev added credibility to the center’s commitment to the republics’ security.

Although the Gorbachev model of ethnofederal democratization failed, it failed not because of any flaw intrinsic to its design. It failed for an entirely secondary reason—Gorbachev misjudged the level of breakdown within his own “force ministries,” most notably the army and KGB. The problem was not that these institutions were incapable of applying coercion—the problem was that their leaders did not have the intelligence (perhaps in both senses of the word) to realize that their troops would not obey orders to shed blood without the firm orders of their Commander-in-Chief, Mikhail Gorbachev. When the nervous nabobs of the August coup issued their infamous proclamation, they unwittingly undermined two critical elements of Gorbachev’s strategy for saving the union. By attempting to seize power, they convinced key republics that Moscow could never be trusted since dark forces always seemed to be lurking in wait of an opportunity to grab the political reins for exploitative purposes. But at the same time that they convinced key republics that they needed to secede, the conspirators provoked a glaring split in the military itself, making outright secession not only thinkable but relatively risk-free. Ukraine then bolted, dragging Russia away with it. In hopes of saving its valuable ties to Ukraine, the Yeltsin administration largely cast away the republics of Central Asia that had virtually prostrated themselves to restore the union, sealing the fragmented fate of post-Soviet Eurasia.

The Gorbachev model had failed, but its failure demonstrated not the strategy’s own inadequacy but the danger inherent in democratizing any unstable ethnofederation. Had a few different men wielded the force of Soviet arms in that momentous August of 1991, we might today be writing about a reforming confederation stretching across the Eurasian continent. Had Gorbachev better understood the lack of communication within the military, or had he more astutely gauged the blind impudence of his chief deputies, we might today still be calling him “Mr. President.” But despite all of these historical what-might-have-beens, the USSR collapsed in the end—and not only the USSR, but also Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. The fact that democratization destroyed all three of these “unstable” unions—despite the diverse leadership strategies of such major twentieth century figures as Mikhail Gorbachev, Vaclav Havel and Slobodan Milosevic—suggests that the underlying centrifugal dynamic is

quite powerful and resistant to a great variety of approaches to combating it. Ironically, it is sometimes the great scope of historical *contingency*, the vast number of possible things that “could go wrong,” that causes ethnofederations to behave in a *predictable* manner. While creative leadership could have defied the odds and saved the USSR, such strategies are by nature extremely delicate. Any number of miscues and false steps could have disrupted the sensitive operation of building trust. Any one of these “chance” events, therefore, could have been expected to trigger the “predicted” collapse of an unstable ethnofederal system as it democratized.

The three Slavic leaders that gathered outside Minsk on that cold December day in 1991, however, were not thinking about chance or the laws of history—they were there to resolve a very immediate crisis of power that threatened the entire Eurasian landmass. Boris Yeltsin and Leonid Kravchuk sought opposite solutions, yet found agreement in the vague symbolism of the Commonwealth of Independent States. Yet it was only later that Yeltsin realized he had been bested. Having set Ukraine free in the hope of keeping it, he found that Ukraine had simply flown away. To make things worse, the Central Asian states had in the meantime found their wings and left the unionist nest. Gorbachev had seen this coming, but only after he himself was too weak to stop it. His day in the sun done, he could only protest as events took their course. The Soviet Union thus ended where Slavic civilization first began, in the dark shadow of the Belorussian forest.