



BACKGROUND FILE

The Demise of the Soviet State

Roland Lomme

Much has been written, both in the USSR and in Western countries, analysing the evolution of the national crisis and the failure of the federal system in the Soviet Union. But the ideological foundations of the federal state and its institutional organisation are no longer the only matters of concern: it is now the existence of the Soviet State itself—that is, the federal state as well as the federate states—that is at stake. Thus the Marxist prophecy of the demise of the state after the advent of communism has come true, except in conditions that would have been unimaginable to the founding fathers. History, alas, is made of such ironies. Though it will provoke considerable upheavals, the demise of the Soviet State is unstoppable: the international community in vain tries to preserve the integrity of the Soviet Union, and relies mistakenly on the chief of the Soviet State, for he no longer enjoys the authority needed in internal politics in order to exercise his constitutional prerogatives.

The propagation of anarchy and the lack of power have convinced more and more citizens of the necessity to restore order, even among the liberal intellectuals who feared they would discredit democracy among the people¹. The central power, giving in to their objurgations, has repeatedly turned to force and repression over the past few months. Is it then a reversal of the way Soviet internal politics has been conducted, as several western observers have asserted? Whatever the intentions of the authorities might have been, they have

ended in an avowal of powerlessness. Could the return to the use of force to maintain order make up for the central power's loss of political legitimacy? The re-establishment of the sovereignty of the federal state would require massive repression, not only in the outlying regions but also in the centre of the country. Instead of restoring order, this repression would inevitably multiply hotbeds of civil war, which for the moment are still confined. The central power is not fully in control of the state forces and their use has already proved to be hazardous and politically prejudicial. Organically and politically divided, they cannot undertake any action without breaking their own ranks.

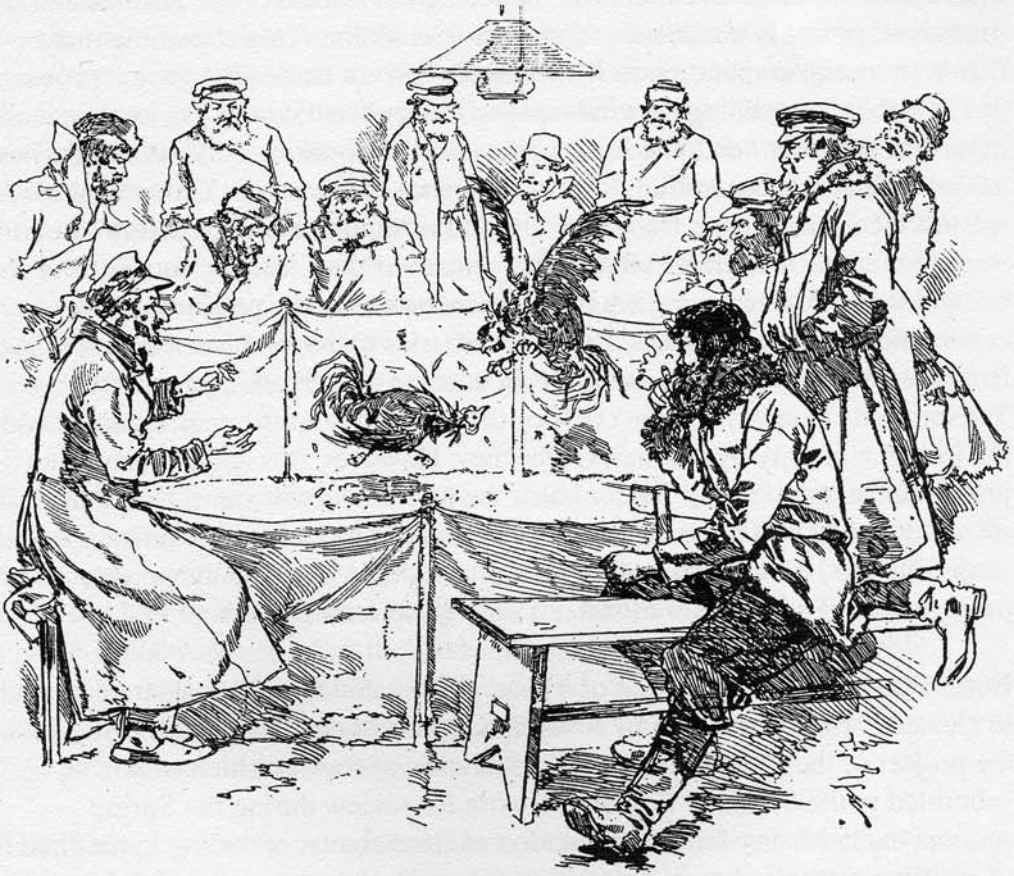
The demise of the Soviet State has extended from the outlying areas to the most central part of the state. Russia has become its most feared enemy. However, the integrity of the federate states is also at stake: the laying out of the internal border lines of the Soviet Union, as defined by the Communist regime, for a large part under Stalin, is losing its legitimacy at the same pace. The demise of the Soviet State is but an intermediary stage in the process of shaping national entities still rather incomplete, and the dismemberment of the Soviet Union should accelerate the recomposition of the states before long independent. If the international community, giving up the territorial status quo, ceases to arm itself with the means to preserve the stability in the region, it will inevitably be confronted with the multiplication of conflicts of sovereignty among the future avatars of the Soviet Union.

Russia versus URSS

The resurgence of Russian nationalism reveals itself far less bellicose than national claims of other peoples of the Union. On the morrow of the October Revolution, Lenin distinguished Russian nationalism, which he regarded as "nationalism of an oppressive people" whose offensive character he stigmatised, from the "nationalism of oppressed nations" whose defensive character justified, in his eyes, the clemency of the authorities². Today, Russian nationalism is, on the contrary, a nationalism of withdrawal, defensive and most often devoid of hegemonic or imperialist aspirations to the point where one is struck by the inertia of the Russian people in the face of the attacks to which they are exposed by other peoples of the Soviet Union.

The dominant opinion in Soviet Russia, at least as it is expressed by the voice of intellectuals, is that Russia is the Soviet republic having paid the heaviest toll for the formation of the Soviet Union, at the price of the exhaustion of its national riches and an acculturation of its inhabitants unmatched in other federate republics. As early as 1975, one of these intellectuals wrote: "the fundamental tendency (of socialist ideology) is the maximum destruction of all nations. The Russians suffer no less than the non-Russians. And it is they who, in fact, have endured the first shock of the attack. ... The crushing of the Russian culture started when even the slightest manifestation of national independence of other peoples was actively encouraged. ... It was the Russian Orthodox Church that received the first blows while Islam was still enjoying an attitude full of respect".³ Another maintains that "the Russian people paid a high price for the absurd right to be the 'big brother' to other peoples" of the Soviet Union.⁴ These first ones have risen up against the policy of Russification pursued by the regime with an unequal determination since 1917.

The Russians fear, on the contrary, that Russia, threatened by "Islamisation", will become "the colony of its colonies": "Given ... the rapid demographic growth of the people of Central Asia, one can be certain that the pursuit of the formation of a meta-ethnic community will not be founded essentially on Russian cultural stereotypes (or in a larger sense, Christian). It is particularly for this reason that the Russian people are more and more acculturated [literally dis-ethnicised]".⁵ The former protest—sometimes violently as at Alma-Ata in 1986, after the nomination of a Russian as the first secretary of the Communist party in Kazakhstan replacing a Kazakh—against the over-representation of Russians in the ruling organs, and the latter complain of being denied certain rights given to the first ones, such as having their own Communist party and a science academy—their cause eventually won in the Spring of 1990. To the former, the Russian hegemony is one of the regime's motives, while the latter are indignant to be blamed for the faults of a corrupt system of which they feel they are above all the victims. Both hold the other mutually responsible for the spoilage of their national wealth: according to an opinion survey conducted in March 1990, for the journal *Glasnost*, a majority of Moscovites believed that all the outlying republics lived at the expense of Russia and they wished,



Cock fight

therefore, that they accede to economic independence. No matter if objective reality, difficult to evaluate, gives credit to neither assessment:⁶ in Russia, public opinion seems to be more and more inclined to the idea that withdrawal is a precondition to national well-being, and the rulers of Soviet Russia are themselves manifestly inclined to Cartierism.

Since his election to the head of the Russian state in the Spring of 1990, Boris Yeltsin has worked towards Russia's accession to sovereignty, even independence, as well as for the dismemberment of the Soviet Union as a

federation. The stake in the conflict opposing the leaders of the Baltic states to the central power is not decisive for the Soviet Union. This is nothing more than a territorial amputation to which the Bolshevik leadership gave its consent in 1918, thereby opening "a window onto the civilised world," as Lenin stated then.⁷ On the other hand, the stake in the conflict opposing Mikhail Gorbachev to Boris Yeltsin is primordial: it is the existence of the Soviet Union itself. It is not just a conflict arising from rival ambitions, but the incompatibility of two state formations and the inevitable antagonism of their leaders: for the time being, incapable of carrying on an autonomous economic policy because of carelessness or lack of means, Boris Yeltsin tries to divert the discontent of the Russians over to Mikhail Gorbachev. In order to preserve his popularity, Yeltsin needs to aggravate the crisis of the legitimacy of the central power and the loss of authority by Mikhail Gorbachev. However, this antagonism is not just circumstantial: Boris Yeltsin holds the title of chief of state. The March 17 referendum lets him hope for imminent ratification by universal suffrage of his status, but the Union's treaty does not permit him to exercise the presidential prerogatives of a true chief of state, if only in defence matters.

Boris Yeltsin's ambition is that of a head of state and his political strategy tends to elevate Russia to the rank of sovereign, that is, independent state. The text of the project of the Constitution of the federation of Russia which should be submitted to the Supreme Soviet of Russia for review during the Spring session, excludes any form of alienation of sovereignty, including in the field of security: according to the constitutional project, the president of the federation of Russia, proclaimed "commander-in-chief of the armed forces of the federation of Russia," is the only holder of the power to nominate and to dismiss the military high command: he is the one who "gives the order of partial or total mobilisation, to place on alert the armed forces of the federation of Russia and any other means necessary in case of a threat of aggression against the Russian federation" and "who orders the start of military operations". It is the Parliament of Russia that holds the power to declare war and to call for "the contingent ... if it is necessary to fulfil international obligations contracted in order to preserve peace and security." These arrangements transgress those of the treaty of the Union which confers to federal instances the power to declare war.

On October 25, 1990, the Supreme Soviet of Russia adopted a resolution which objects to the participation of Russian conscripts during their military service in the repression of trouble in other republics of the Union, and the project of the Constitution of the federation of Russia confirms that "the armed forces of the federation of Russia having been constituted for the armed defence of the sovereignty of the state and the territorial integrity of the federation of Russia, their use outside of Russian territory is forbidden in time of peace." Therefore, when last January Boris Yeltsin exhorted the enlisted men of Russian origin stationed in the Baltic states to insubordination if they received the order to intervene against the population or the national movement in Vilnius, he was assured of the support of a large part of the Russian as well as of the Soviet public opinion.

Thus, the authority of the central power is irremediably held up to ridicule in the implementation of one of the intangible prerogatives of the state, that is, the maintenance of public order and the carrying out of the defence policy. From now on it will be contradicted not only in the outlying republics—as it happened last summer when the Armenian and Georgian leaders notably refused to abide by the presidential decree of July 24, ordering the confiscation of weapons held by the paramilitary formations which they had placed under their protection—but in the very heart of the state.

Boris Yeltsin probably does not aspire to Mikhail Gorbachev chair; on the contrary he endeavours the decline of the federal state and multiplies in the meantime the bilateral and multilateral relations among the Soviet republics to prove that a supranational authority is not necessary to the survival of the Union. In this undertaking, he interweaves the aspiration of leaders and peoples of other republics so well that his popularity there often reaches unequaled peaks.

Gerry-mandering, Soviet style

The state crisis in the Soviet Union affects not only the federal state, but also the federate states. The dismemberment of the Union does not mean in any way the triumph of the nations as the peoples of the Soviet Union are for the most

part still seeking a national identity for which the independence of the federate republics will not be sufficient. On the present territory of the Union there were no nation-state traditions prior to the installation of the Soviet power. "In the Russian Empire, the historical matrix which would have permitted its natural dismemberment in as many reconstituted nation-states simply did not exist, as the various regions of the empire were made up of either principalities and local lords, or of empires, yes, of empires!—such as the land of Timoride and the Georgian, Armenian and Azerbaijan kingdom of David the Constructor. All things considered, the kingdom of Lithuania was also an empire".⁸ The national shaping of the peoples of the empire, including the Russians, was then unfinished, and was not given the final touch under the Soviet system.

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Hostile to the principle of extraterritorial national autonomy, the Bolsheviks based the Soviet federal system on the principle of territorial autonomy and attributed in this framework to the peoples of the Union a territory whose political or administrative status was determined according to the level reached, in the opinion of the authorities, by the titular population in its national formation: the tribes were assigned an autonomous territory; peoples "without history", an autonomous region; semi-nations, an autonomous republic, and full-fledged nations, a federate republic. Territorial cutting up was then introduced, and has evolved in some cases like in Central Asia—where Tadzhikistan, Kazakhstan and Kirghizia were transformed from autonomous to federate republics, one in 1929 and the others in 1936—on the basis of a classification of the peoples of the Union which most probably does not please those who are at the bottom of the list. The Abkhazis are only title holders to

an autonomous republic and the Georgians of a federate republic, for the regime did not recognise to the former the status of a full nation, which it granted to the latter.

The territorial integrity of the federate republics will not survive the dismemberment of the Union, because all the interior border lines—that is, not only the borders separating the federate republics but also the numerous borders within each federate republic—were drawn by the Soviet power. In Georgia, republican authorities in their struggle against the national vindications of the Ossetians, dropped at the end of last year the status of autonomy of their territory under the pretext—founded in history—that the creation of the South Ossetian autonomous region, just like the autonomous republics of Adjara and Abkhazia, reflected the central power's intention to thwart Georgian nationalism by carving up the Georgian territory and to deprive its people of a part of its sovereignty. The president of the Georgian republic, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, is as determined to restore the independence of Georgia as he is to make it the state of the Georgian nation, while only two thirds of its population are of Georgian nationality. Elsewhere, certain national minorities such as the Gagauzes, an Orthodox Turkish-speaking population in Moldavia, or the Polish in the region of Vilnius in Lithuania, have granted themselves an autonomous status which the republican authorities strongly contest.

The conflicts between the federate republics and their autonomous regions or republics are multiplying: the harshest is the one taking place since 1988 in the autonomous region of Nagorno-Karabakh, where the inhabitants are mostly Armenian. Yet others will inevitably arise in the republic of Russia, where peoples from the Volga basin and from the Caucasus have an old tradition of rebellion against the central power. In Russia, the autonomous republics of Tatars, of Komis, of Tchetshens, of Ingushes, and of the Northern Ossetians refused to hold on their territory the referendum of March 17, for the election of the Russian federation president, fearing that a presidential regime would also be centralist and Jacobinist.

The nation-state is probably not feasible, even if there were to be a revision of internal borders on most of the Soviet territory, and this includes two of the



Ivan the Terrible

three Baltic states: Estonia, of which the titular nation represents barely half of the population, and Latvia, of which it does not even represent one out of two inhabitants. Wise are those who have understood it, as the leaders of the Russian federation who acknowledge the "multinational" character of the Russian people in their constitutional projects, and as the Ukrainian authorities who have agreed to grant autonomous status to the Crimea. The Ukraine is so far from being a nation-state that the president of the Soviet of the Lvov region, a western Ukrainian province which belonged to Poland before the Second World War, suggested that the Ukrainian state be federalised, that is, transformed into "a federal union of historical provinces according to the East German scheme."⁹

But the crisis of the federate states is not just a result of national conflicts; it also stems from the loss of legitimacy by the State: the state authority, whether federal or federate, is thwarted everywhere by a general inclination towards autarky, which the economic crisis aggravates, and by the deliberate violation of the hierarchy of norms. The regime's failure reflects on the state power, on the state as a principle of political organisation: free economical areas, "free cities," proliferate, and certain metropolitan areas, production centres, proclaim their sovereignty to the point that it seems reminiscent of the era of principalities.

The trap of reform

The central power has agreed to the reform of federalism—demanded since 1988, in the Baltic republics—only as of spring 1990. In other words, after the new political leaders of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia had denounced not only the conditions of their annexation but also their belonging to the Soviet Union, and just a few months before other federate republics, such as Armenia, Georgia, and Moldavia were to contest the legitimacy of the Union treaty and the existence of the Soviet federation itself by claiming their independence. In fact, since the first sovereignty declarations adopted in the spring of 1989, in the Baltic republics, all the protagonists of debates and controversies about the revision of the Union treaty have been playing with words. Some, such as the Armenians, claim for their independence but without any intention of seceding;

the majority officially proclaim only their sovereignty, but in excluding all alienation of sovereignty to the benefit of a federal authority, they in fact demand independence. The central power, broken up better than others by the practice it has carried on for quite a long time, has fallen into its own trap:



The funeral

without a doubt, it has obtained that the reform of the Union treaty, according to the interpretation given by the central power as the preservation of the Soviet Union as a federal state, be approved by universal suffrage and then ratified by the parliamentary organs of the federate republics, but at the price of the inanity of the content of the text of the Treaty, which the negotiations required for its writing have filled with ambiguity.¹⁰

The actual stake of the referendum was not the survival of the Union, but of its institutional organisation: is the Soviet Union to remain a federal state or

should it instead become a community of independent states? "Will the Union be a full sovereign state or a symbolic entity void of content?",¹¹ asked Mikhail Gorbachev on the eve of the ballot, revealing his regret for not having been able to impose the preservation of the federal system. The issue was already settled as soon as the president of the Russian federation used all his authority to favour the creation of a community of independent states and the demise of the federal state.

But is the absence of the central power final? Doesn't the Soviet State leader still retain the legitimacy and the necessary means to re-establish his authority and to preserve the integrity of the Union as a state?

Since his election as head of the Soviet State in December 1988, Mikhail Gorbachev's personal authority progressively became the only alternative to the regime's crisis, but the presidentialisation of the regime betrayed the helplessness of the other state organs, and did not give to the head of state the means required to re-establish the economic and political situation. Because he has been progressively invested with almost all of the powers of the Soviet State, he now is held fully responsible for the failure of the system. From now on, the emperor has no clothes: he is no longer able to overcome his loss of credibility through the use of the armed forces whose monopoly he no longer possesses. However, nobody will take Mikhail Gorbachev's place, as his political destiny no longer is related to struggles within the leading elite, but to the future of the federal state. There is no credible alternative to the Gorbachev leadership, and yet the Gorbachev leadership has no future.

In order to legitimise its existence and its prerogatives, the central power has evoked in vain the risks of confrontation of sovereignty conflicts and of cataclysm which would arise from the dismemberment process of the Union. It has threatened recalcitrant federate republics with supporting their own dismemberment by sanctioning the sovereignty, if not the independence, of autonomous regions or republics. Thus, according to the law of April 3, 1990, which defines secession conditions for a federate republic, all the autonomous territorial entities, regions or republics of a federate republic granted independence have themselves the right to secede in order to remain an integral

part of the Soviet Union. The federal legislation allows, for example, the autonomous region of South Ossetia to dissociate from independent Georgia to join the North Ossetian autonomous region within the Soviet Union. The Union treaty deliberately does not distinguish federate republics from autonomous republics, whose sovereignty it equally granted: it does not draw attention to the pre-eminence of federate republics over any other autonomous territorial entity, to the point where in reality it contradicts the sovereignty as well as the territorial integrity of the federate republics, and in particular, of the Russian republic, as "the Union treaty legally authorises each of the sixteen Russian autonomous republics, like all other autonomous territories which are self proclaimed republics, to secede [from Russia] without preliminary negotiation".¹²

However, the central power's stratagems, far from restraining the federate republics in their struggle for independence, have on the contrary persuaded them that their territorial integrity and political stability would be better insured after the dismemberment of the Union. From now on, as opinion surveys prove, Soviet citizens are convinced that the internal public order is much more seriously threatened than the outer borders of the Union; the main risk they face is that of the multiplication of civil war hotbeds and their expansion throughout the Soviet territory, more than that of being attacked from the outside.

Fighting fire with fire

Military intervention, whether in Tbilisi in May 1989, in Baku in January 1990, or in Vilnius in January 1991, has systematically exacerbated the antagonism due to its awkwardness and extreme brutality, and confirms the central power's inability to restore internal political stability. Such interventions have also contributed to the central authority's loss of legitimacy in arbitrating sovereignty conflicts between bordering republics or in inter-ethnic confrontations.

This is the case in the Caucasus, where the central power's mediation in the conflict between Armenians and Azeris has had no effect, and has appeared to

each of the protagonists to be contrary to their interests. Eventually, these interventions resulted in loss of the benefits of the negotiations held with Baltic state leaders during the past few years.

The armed forces of the Ministry of Interior and of the Ministry of Defence are inappropriate for maintaining order as they were only conceived for repression. The Ministry of the Interior's armed forces are essentially composed of conscripts and equipped with heavy weaponry; professional units specialised in the maintenance of order have been created for a few months only. The military hierarchy is evidently reluctant to resort to the use of the Ministry of Defence's forces as a means of restoring public order: it is clear that the role they played in the repression of disorder in the outlying republics gave birth to inter-ethnic conflicts throughout their own ranks, provoking the hostility of the population to the point where the draft system crisis is probably irreversible.

Together with the refusal by republican authorities to allow their nationals to take part in military operations designed to maintain order outside national territory, comes the massive desertion of the contingent, not only in peripheral republics—in the spring of 1990, only 7.5 per cent of conscripts answered the call to arms, a third in Georgia and in Lithuania, two out of five in Estonia and a little over half in Latvia—but on a national scale, in 1990, 40 per cent of conscripts dodged the draft. It is usually assumed that the military institution is flawlessly attached to the Union's integrity and to the unity of the armed forces.

The redeployment of troops in Soviet territory correlative to the unilateral and negotiated retreat of troops stationed to the west of the Urals undoubtedly originates from the upheaval of strategic space within whose scope falls the defence of the Soviet Union's borders. Since the end of the 1970s, the political borders are no longer strategic fronts, due to the multiplication of conventional and nuclear vectors, with long ranges and high accuracy, capable of striking deep into the adversary's territory. Faced with the military devices deployed by NATO in Western Europe, the Eastern bloc was not sufficient in order to maintain the sanctuary-like status of the Soviet territory in the event a conflict

in Europe. The southern regions of the Union are now under the threat of ballistic missiles which proliferate in the Middle East and in Asia. Now, the amputation of part of its territory does not necessarily threaten the vital interests of the Soviet State, which explains why certain military officials publicly consider the organisation of the country's defence within the borders of 1939, in other words in an area not inclusive of the Baltic republics, the regions of Kaliningrad, Galicia, Subcarpathic Ukraine, Moldavia and Bessarabia.

Furthermore, the training of national armies, comparable to those which completed the regular units of the Red Army between 1925 and 1938, is advocated by certain field officers,¹³ and is, however, disavowed by the military hierarchy. The ethnic and national diversity of the contingent's conscripts considerably and dangerously affects the operational ability of the troops: according to Commander Lopatin, two out of five draftees do not master the command vocabulary, a ratio twelve times higher than twenty years ago.

Finally, the re-establishment of the Union's political unity is excluded, as the Communist party, earlier an essential instrument in this process, has lost its monopoly of the leadership in most of the federate republics, and on some occasions has been put out of power, if not from the administrative hierarchy following the local elections of 1990. The very principle of the monolithic party gave in, during the 18th Congress in July 1990, under the pressure of its republican organs who sought in the acknowledgement of their autonomy the means for restoring their national legitimacy. The party's federalisation granted by its new statutes has nonetheless failed to prevent its split, as some of its republican organisations, like in Georgia and in Lithuania, seceded.

Voting lessons

The ballot has not separated Union partisans from their adversaries. The question asked of Soviet citizens was too equivocal and the stakes too numerous for their votes to be significant. This referendum was also a plebiscite: the central power assumed that a massive vote in favour of the

Union also be considered a vote of confidence towards the head of the Soviet State. However, the leaders of the federate republics saw to it that their authority remained safe and their political strategies and choices approved: some added one or several questions to the one asked by the central power—as was the case in the republic of Russia where the inhabitants were invited to express themselves on the election of the president of the republic, as well, at the ballot box. Others modified its formulation, as was the case in Kazakhstan where the citizens were consulted on the need to preserve the Soviet Union not as “a renovated federation of equally sovereign republics” like elsewhere, but as “a union of sovereign states equal under the law”.¹⁴ Still others refused the organisation of the referendum on their national territory, as in the Baltic republics, Moldavia, Georgia, and Armenia. By their abstention, their citizens were asked to express their support for the local authorities. These entities have often managed to divert the benefits on which the central power was counting as a result of the plebiscite, or at least share these benefits. Nursultan Nazarbaev is more reassured by the results of the referendum, as president of the republic of Kazakhstan, and so is Boris Yeltsin, as president of the republic of Russia. This is not the case for Mikhail Gorbachev, even though he recorded a much higher number of votes than his adversary in the republic of Russia (71.3 per cent against 69.8 per cent).

If the central power has congratulated itself for the rate of participation and the number of votes in favour of the Union, the results of the referendum also show the evolution of a public opinion which is more and more hostile towards the survival of the federal state and even the integrity of the federate states themselves. As a Soviet observer pointed out on the eve of the ballot, “if Russia gives a favourable response to the referendum on the Union, but also expresses its support for the installation of a presidential regime in the republic of Russia, it will signify that the largest federate republic adheres to the principle of the Union, but in the sense given by Yeltsin (an union of sovereign republics), and not in Gorbachev’s sense of the word”.¹⁵

It is remarkable that among the nine republics where the ballot took place normally, Russia and the Ukraine have reported the lowest percentage of votes in favour of the Union. The extent of the independence movement in the



Elizabeth Petrovna, Empress of Russia

western Ukraine is well known. In the regions of Lvov, Ivano-Frankovsk and Ternopol, local authorities took the opportunity created by the referendum to question the citizens on the independence of Ukraine. However, those who like A. Solzhenitsyn consider that the community of Slavic people in the Soviet Union is indissoluble and should outlive the Soviet Union itself, probably did not suppose that the inhabitants of Kiev, among which there are many Russians, preferred in their immense majority to the preservation of the federation of Soviet republics, the formation of a "union of sovereign states" based on the declaration of sovereignty adopted by the Supreme Soviet of the Ukraine on July 16, 1990. The national feeling in Ukraine, though at a much slower pace and to a lesser extent than in other federate republics, is getting tougher: thus, since last summer, the Ukrainian national movement, Rukh, until then claiming only autonomy for the Ukraine, now calls for independence.

Have Russian expatriates in the outlying republics demonstrated more attachment to the survival of the Union than their fellow citizens living in Russia? Those living in Central Asia (about 10 million) have unanimously voted in favour of the Union, but is this the case of those living in the Baltic republics (more than one million seven-hundred thousand)? The analysis of the results does not allow for a judgment, but the opinion polls reveal that an important percentage is favourable to secession. The attachment of the Russian diaspora to the Union is not yet completely loyal, unless it feels threatened by the native peoples, like in Central Asia and on a smaller scale in western Ukraine and in Estonia. Generally speaking, it manifests, except in Central Asia, a rather weak tendency to a collective organisation for the defence of its interests.¹⁶

Central Asia to the rescue?

The peoples of Central Asia apparently expressed themselves massively in favour of the integrity of the Soviet Union in the March 17 ballot. All the republics of Central Asia agreed to hold the referendum—even if in Kazakhstan the question submitted to voters was formulated differently—and it is on their territory that the rate of participation and the ratio of favourable

votes were the highest. Is this, however, tangible proof of the allegiance of their peoples and leaders to the central power and of the absence of separatist inclinations in this region of the Union? Not really. This ballot clearly reflects more the anxiety provoked by the supposed economic consequences of the dismemberment of the union and the characteristics proper to the regional political system rather than an authentic adhesion. In Central Asia, the Union is not perceived as a community of members, but it is still considered as a community of interests. Will it remain that way when the Central Asian republics will have managed to develop international economic exchanges to attract foreign investments, and to create the industrial bases of their economic autonomy, as they are trying to do today?

The republics in Central Asia are still kept in a state of economic dependence by a division of labour according to which they exclusively produce and export minerals or agricultural raw materials, so that "in its social development, Central Asia is confronted with numerous problems belonging more to developing countries than to other Soviet republics".¹⁷ In spite of the investments agreed upon by the central power, the gap between the level of development of the Central Asian republics and the rest of the Union is growing, and since the early 1960s, in Central Asia, the rate of urbanisation has decreased to such an extent that it "becomes more and more evident that it will become one of the world's least urbanised regions by the beginning of the next century".¹⁸

The apparent unanimity among the peoples of Central Asia in the March 17 election also reveals the inertia of the regional political system. Soviet observers are usually inclined to stigmatise the "oriental despotism" of indigenous populations and to denounce through the corruption and clientelism, which are the main motives of the regime, the symptoms of their political culture and of their social traditions. However, the indigenous populations are not the only factors at stake: the Slavs are numerous among senior leaders of the republican organs of the Communist party as well as in organs of the Central Asian state. They have not only tolerated a way of exercising power derogatory to "socialist lawfulness," but have also contributed to its development—in the fashion of the representatives of the French state who, under the Third and Fourth Republics, refused the

enforcement of republican laws in the colonies under the pretext that they were not adapted to them, and who attributed it to the backwardness of the native populations' method of administration to which they were partly associated but that they had not chosen.

In the second half of the 1980s, the ranks of the Communist party and of the administration of Uzbekistan were subject to various purges, sanctioned by numerous death sentences following resounding lawsuits and echoed in major press campaigns. However, these assimilated too often the "Uzbek mafia" and the Uzbek people or society, up to a point where some of their representatives publicly expressed their concern. In fact, by denouncing the corruption and the "tribalism" of the political elites in Central Asia, the central power tried to recover the control of the local power mechanisms.

The Breshnev leadership had ensured the growing autonomy of the political leaders in the outlying republics and had allowed them to enjoy a certain freedom in the exercise of power provided that the regime's unity be formally respected. However, "by the end of Breshnev's lifetime, some Party ideologists had begun to avow that too much self-direction had been granted to the nationalities, in general, and to the national republics, in particular, and that it was time to reassert the fact that Leninist doctrine demanded the ultimate fusion of the nationalities and not their development into distinct and stable ethnic and political entities".¹⁹

The dismissal of the Kazakh first secretary of the Kazakhstan Communist party, Dinmukhamed Kunaiev, in December 1986, and his replacement by a Russian, Gennadi Kolbin, reflected the Jacobin reaction which marked the first years of the Gorbachev leadership.

This decision deliberately violated a rule in use since the accession of Leonid Breshnev to Secretary General of the CPSU, according to which in the federate republics, the first secretaries of the Party belonged to the titular nation and were formally backed by Russians—who ensured the respect of the directives issued by the central power and the formal unity of the political system. The demonstrators who marched in the streets of Alma-Ata in December 1986,

demanding respect of the principle "to each population, its leaders," rebelled against the Gorbachev's Jacobinism and its corollary: the Russification of the leadership of the republican organs.

According to Alexander Bennigsen, the people of Central Asia tolerate even less the hegemony of the Russian people since they have the feeling that their own culture and their own civilisation are infinitely richer and older. The Russian Empire distinguished itself in this way from the French or British Empires in that the Russian colonising nation experienced towards the colonised peoples a feeling of inferiority while the latter felt superior: the Mongolian domination under which the Moslem peoples had learned, unlike the Russians, how to preserve their political and cultural identity, "has inspired the Russians with a deep respect for the political superiority of the Tatars, and consequently, a lasting feeling of inferiority towards their ancient masters which still persists today, conferring a unique character onto the relationship between Russians and Moslems." ²⁰

The results of the March 17 ballot in Central Asia reflect both the calculated and probably transient allegiance of the local political leaders but not of the native peoples to the central power, the inertia of the political system in the countryside, and finally, the attachment to the Union of the "small whites" who fill urban agglomerations.

The local political leaders have expensively, though discretely, sold their support: the president of the Kazakhstan republic, Nursultan Nazarbaev, has already partially committed himself to follow in the steps of Boris Yeltsin in terms of the establishment of direct relationships among republics independently from the central power, and has withdrawn only *in extremis* from the conclusion of a four-party political agreement associating the republics of Russia, Ukraine, Bielorussia, and Kazakhstan. In Central Asia, including in some metropolitan areas, society is becoming increasingly rural—the rural population has more than doubled in the past thirty years. In cities and industrial centres, namely in the five republican capitals, the non-native peoples, basically Slavic, often represent a large majority. Contrary to the settlers in the western republics of the Union, those who live in Central

Asia fear that the secession of their adopted home country could infringe upon their interests.

International gitters

Confronted with the demise of the Soviet State, the international community is hesitant to support the principle of claims to independence because of the fear of unpredictable upheavals which would inevitably provoke the questioning of the territorial status quo in a country that covers a sixth of the planet's emerged lands. Are then the logic of the state and the right of the people to self-determination irreconcilable concepts?

The status quo is from now on impracticable; the aim must be stability. Since the Second World War, European security has been founded on the territorial status quo, and Westerners hesitate to give up what they still perceive as a necessary guarantee. However, the integrity of the Soviet Union, already greatly fictional, is a pipedream and the international consecration of the head of the Soviet State is no longer of any help. It is up to the international community to design a framework both flexible but constraining that would allow the recomposition of the state in the Soviet Union and the reintegration of the states soon to be independent into the concert of nations, by urging them to abide by the multilateral treaties and agreements and to adhere to international organisations which have founded military and political stability.

This process does not exclude the development of diplomatic relations with the Soviet State and would probably gain consent as the multiplication of partners and the diversification of the economic and political relationships of the federate republics are also the guarantee of the political and institutional stability of the Soviet Union itself.

The Soviet Constitution authorises the individual adhesion of the federate republics to international institutions (Ukraine and Bielorussia are represented at the General Assembly of the United Nations since 1945) and the Union treaty recognises their status as sovereign members of the international community and allows them to "establish without any intermediary,

diplomatic, consular and commercial and other ties with foreign countries, to exchange with them diplomatic representatives, to conclude international agreements and to participate directly in the activity of international organisations." The central power already involves some neighbouring states of the Union in the re-establishment of the public order in the USSR: in 1989, at its request, the Iranian leaders intervened in Azerbaijan to moderate the Azeri nationalist movement in its claims. They invested themselves with so much zeal, for they feared that the independence of Azerbaijan might be only a step towards the reunification with Iranian Azerbaijan.

The Soviet State has also associated Turkey, a traditional foe, in the re-establishment of the public order in Azerbaijan in compensation for the development of direct relations between the two peoples, sanctioned by the conclusion of an agreement for cultural exchange signed by president Turgut Ozal during an official visit to the Soviet Union in March 1991. It finally encouraged the proselytism of Saudi Arabia and of Iran in Central Asia in a similar perspective. Thus, in Central Asia, a new network of diplomatic relations is in the making: will it lead, as some predict, to the emergence of a new political and strategic balance in the Islamic world as a whole? "Do Westerners need to start accepting a larger Central Asia as a potentially more active part of the Moslem world, a part that will strive to get involved in Far Eastern political game?" ²¹

In Europe, Westerners still hesitate to anticipate and prepare the completion of the dismemberment of the Soviet Union: rare are those ready to approve the independence of the Baltic states. Only Iceland and Czechoslovakia have dared. French diplomacy has never supported their annexation, but is very careful now not to draw conclusions from this position of principle.

The majority of the European Soviet republics strive for international recognition of the autonomy of their foreign policy. Russia strives to be associated with the operations of the World Bank. The Ukraine intends, like the Baltic republics, to take part in the CSCE, and even in the European Council.

A collective security system that would not be based on the autonomous

participation of the Soviet republics and their individual adhesion to the disarmament treaties or to the Helsinki agreements, and that would engage only the Soviet State but not the federate states of the Soviet Union would have no future. Some republics, such as Moldavia, with regard to Bessarabia and North Bukovina—sovereign territories allocated to the Ukraine in the aftermath of the Second World War—are already suggesting that the mapping of the borders be questioned again. And most seek the means and the ways to reach an independent defence policy.

It is too late to peg away at striking a balance which is already partially unattainable, but it is still time to shape its predictable evolution.

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