

The Interstate Relations of USSR Dissolution

The August Coup, the Belovezha Accords and the Alma Ata Protocol

*Ioannis Sidiropoulos*¹

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¹ [Ioannis Sidiropoulos](#) is Non-Resident Fellow at the Diplomatic Academy – University of Nicosia.

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The collapse of the Soviet Union is a historic event that marked the end of the "last" so-called empire of the 20th century. This event is usually seen as a geopolitical catalyst for numerous changes in Eastern Europe, Central Asia and elsewhere in the world. While the impact of this collapse had been evident in the massive and groundbreaking changes brought upon in the politics and diplomatic orientation of Eastern European "satellite states", there is also the internal aspect of domestic Soviet politics, the relations between the constituent republics, and the domestic equilibrium of power that proves to be less popular in the Western analysis. However, these issues of power and politics remain very important to understand the background of the above-mentioned changes (fall of communist regimes in Europe, ideological reassessment in China, cessation of communist intervention in Africa, further isolation of Cuba and North Korea) that played a major role in the 20th century diplomacy.

Background

Under premier Leonid Brezhnev and his two short lived successors, Yuri Antropov and Constantin Chernenko, the Soviet bloc went through a 20-year period (1964 – 1984) called the "Era of Stagnation".² This characterization refers to the slowdown of the Soviet economy, the complacency caused by successes of the past (such as the victory in WW2, the rapid industrial advances and the space race firsts), the aversion towards innovation that worsened the gap of technological progress towards the West, the deterioration of political relations with the latter, and the growing dissatisfaction of the population in the satellite states of the Eastern Europe.

The rise of a younger leader to power, Mikhail Gorbachev, while heralded with optimism and enthusiasm and bringing about new policies such as those of Perestroika (the practice of restructuring or reforming the economic and political system of USSR) and Glasnost (the policy of more open consultative government

² alphahistory.com/coldwar/stagnation-soviet-union/

and wider dissemination of information), it also sped up the deterioration of the state of the Union.³ Moreover, Gorbachev's policies fueled nationalist forces in the constituent republics and overstretched the already ailing economy, eventually driving to a huge deficit in food, medicine, fuel, and a great political unrest.⁴

Throughout this period, political dissidence became even more difficult to suppress, while important communist figures such as Boris Yeltsin and Leonid Kravchuk started reviewing their personal political beliefs and allegiance, turning, from loyal officials of the Party, to representatives of opposition against the communist political/ideological orthodoxy as this was expressed by the conservative members of the establishment, advocating for radical reforms of the soviet institutions, the economy and the society.⁵

The decisive turn was the downfall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, most of them during the 1989 – 1990 period, with Albania being the last one in 1992. Gorbachev did not oppose these changes that were backed by popular people's movements (i.e. the Solidarnosc in Poland), something that would mean a return to the so-called "Brezhnev doctrine"⁶ (a Soviet foreign policy that proclaimed that any threat to "socialist rule" in any state of the Soviet Bloc in Central and Eastern Europe was a threat to all of them, and therefore, it justified the intervention of fellow socialist states) and just watched as the Berlin Wall fell (the so-called "Sinatra doctrine").⁷ What he had in mind was the political reform of the USSR into a new, looser Union of sovereign states, pursuing the signing of a new treaty that would strip many of the Politburo members of their powers.

The Nature of Intra-Soviet Relations: Authorities and Popular Movements

The domestic politics of former Soviet states is somewhat *sui generis*, as it does not include the bilateral relations between independent countries at the time, though it looks at politics entailed by the special nature of the relations of the then-constituent republics of the Union with the center, the Union institutions. At the same time, it equally observes the influence of the newly "unchained" Eastern European nations and the Western support they were provided with.

The Eastern bloc, while seemingly robust from an outer point of view during the first post-war years, quickly became heavily fractioned. The crises were soon to become manifest: the first disagreements with Josip Broz Tito, leader of

³ www.history.com/topics/cold-war/perestroika-and-glasnost

⁴ www.nytimes.com/1990/11/27/world/evolution-in-europe-food-shortages-cause-desperation-in-moscow.html

⁵ "The role of the transitional leader: A comparative analysis of Adolfo Suárez and Boris Yeltsin."

⁶ www.jstor.org/stable/40704652

⁷ www.nationalreview.com/2004/05/sinatra-doctrine-william-f-buckley-jr/

Yugoslavia who chose to implement a different ideological and socioeconomic model that drove to the 1948 split,⁸ the workers' uprising that challenged communist policies in East Germany in 1953⁹ and in Hungary in 1956,¹⁰ the Sino-Soviet split in 1959-1960 that created the first considerable polarization in the communist world,¹¹ the ensuing Albanian withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact taking sides with China,¹² the Prague Spring of 1968 that drove to the intervention of the Warsaw Pact forces to restore communist "order"¹³ and the suppression of the Solidarnosc movement in Poland by the Moscow-inspired imposition of martial law;¹⁴ all these events constituted expressions of significant countervailing forces in the bloc. Thus, the conditions that led to the demise of the so-called "Last Empire" were not created overnight, but rather evolved through decades to culminate to a series of events during the end of the 80s with the expression of strong political dissidence in various socialist states, that affected the very heart of the bloc.

While this analysis does not address the process of democratization in the satellite countries of Eastern Europe, it is likely that these events had been a major alerting and motivating factor for the people, politicians, and institutions in the USSR, as they affected the perspective and the political pursuits of those latter. With the apparent failure of the centrally commanded economy to satisfy even the most basic needs of the population and the continuing suppression of political and social freedoms, the people of East Germany and Romania sent a powerful message to their leaderships and to the world: the fall of Berlin Wall in November 1989¹⁵ and the uprising in Timisoara in December of the same year that led to the execution of Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife.¹⁶

The public opinion in the Baltic states has always viewed the Soviets as an occupation force. Indeed, the first strong political and social reactions that concerned the Kremlin, were the ones in this region. The Lithuanian Socialist Soviet Republic declared the sovereignty of its territory on 18 May 1989 and the independence from the Soviet Union on 11 March 1990 as the Republic of

⁸ www.jstor.org/stable/26923606

⁹ nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB50/

¹⁰ nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB76/

¹¹ www.smithsonianmag.com/history/khrushchev-in-water-wings-on-mao-humiliation-and-the-sino-soviet-split-80852370/

¹² www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/07075332.2019.1620825

¹³ www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/czechoslovakia2.htm

¹⁴ culture.pl/en/article/the-day-poland-stood-still-memories-from-the-introduction-of-martial-law

¹⁵ www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50013048

¹⁶ news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/574200.stm

Lithuania.¹⁷ It was the first Baltic state to assert state continuity and the first Soviet Republic to declare full independence from the Union.¹⁸ This came as a shock for the Soviet leadership that claimed this declaration to be illegal, not following the secession provisions of the Soviet Constitution. Lithuania responded that it did not need to follow the process of secession because the entire process by which Lithuania had joined the Soviet Union violated both Lithuanian and international law in the first place.¹⁹

However, strong countervailing nationalist forces had already manifested at least since 1988, with the first clashes between Armenians and Azeris in the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave.²⁰ All the above events triggered Soviet political and military intervention, with border forces normally designated for the defence against an external enemy moving for internal repression against the uprising forces.²¹ This alone revealed that the Union was becoming increasingly unstable with serious questions posed about its governability.

In examining the intra-Soviet intricacies and mechanisms that contributed towards dissolution, it is important to remember that, despite the iron fist with which central communist leadership in Moscow governed the country, the Union was comprised of 15 Soviet socialist republics, each with their own governing bodies. The heads of these republics had created their own leadership styles, retaining associates in power (i.e., heads of important institutions, managers of factories/collectives, military districts' commanders) and affiliations in an out of the Eastern Bloc. By the end of 80s, they were starting to form diverging perspectives towards the Communist Party of the Soviet Union – CPSU style of governance, in relation to the fate of the Union.²² This is a case of *sui generis* diplomacy, exercised in a nominally politically unified environment, but between *de facto* different states with separate leaderships and largely dissimilar ethnicities.

The contacts and negotiations were first a matter of intra-party diplomacy between the leaderships of national party organizations in each constituent Soviet republic. However, Moscow soon realised that these local parties' officials of those other republics did not represent popular sentiment. With some of them even endorsing nationalist slogans, in an effort to secure a place in the aftermath, it was becoming increasingly obvious that, most of them, when expressing loyalty to the CPSU on behalf of their country, actually expressed no more than their personal

¹⁷ www.history.com/this-day-in-history/lithuania-rejects-soviet-demand-to-renounce-its-independence

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ scholarship.law.nd.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1402&context=jleg

²⁰ www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-09-21-mn-730-story.html

²¹ www.cejiss.org/military-defection-during-the-collapse-of-the-soviet-union-2

²² www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-07-03-mn-677-story.html

position and that of the nomenclature around them. KGB, in cooperation with local security forces of particular republics, such as Poland, was early on alarmed by the increasing pressure of social/political movements on socialist republics authorities, even before their emergence as powerful popular fronts.²³ The strongest opposition seemed to mount in the Baltics and in Caucasus.

In the beginning, Gorbachev tried to tackle the problems without resorting to violence. For instance, he promised greater concessions to the republics in the framework of COMECON (the economic/trade union of Eastern Bloc)²⁴ and more political freedoms in the process of “Demokratizatsiya” (democratization).²⁵ These promises did not seem to curb the opposition and ethnic tensions started to mount. The power of central authorities to dictate the policies of the constituent republics was rapidly diminishing.²⁶ The prestige of Union-wide institutions, such as the Soviet Armed Forces was further harmed²⁷ as Soviet leadership used them to violently suppress demonstrations in various republics such as Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Kazakhstan, and Georgia.

National Elections and Efforts to Disrupt Nationalism

On 7 February 1990, the Central Committee of the CPSU accepted Gorbachev’s recommendation that the Party give up its monopoly on political power.²⁸ Subsequently, all fifteen constituent republics of the USSR held their first free, competitive elections, with reformers and ethnic nationalists winning many seats. The CPSU lost the elections in six republics (Lithuania, Moldova, Estonia, Latvia, Armenia and Georgia).²⁹

Soon afterwards, the republics started declaring their sovereignty and began rejecting union-wide legislation that conflicted with local laws (the so-called “war

²³ www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/poland/8831691/Polish-secret-police-how-and-why-the-Poles-spied-on-their-own-people.html

²⁴ tile.loc.gov/storage-services/master/frd/frdcstdy/ru/russiacountrystu00curt/russiacountrystu00curt.pdf

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ www.jstor.org/stable/152106

²⁷ Ibid n. 20

²⁸ www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1990/02/08/soviet-party-votes-to-drop-monopoly-on-power/3a34693f-a072-4dfc-ab36-a73725fa301c/

²⁹ www.jstor.org/stable/23262734

of laws”)³⁰ and asserted control over their local economies. This caused economic dislocation and exacerbated the decline of the Union.³¹

On 17 March 1991, in a Union-wide referendum, 77% of voters endorsed retention of a reformed Soviet Union. The Baltic republics, Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova boycotted the referendum. In each of the other nine republics, a majority of the voters supported the retention of a reformed Soviet Union.³²

The August Coup: A Politics Circuit Breaker

This situation, causing dissatisfaction and consternation among the Party hardliners, set a series of events in motion that eventually drove to the 1991 August Coup.³³ Certain ministers and officials of the Union, the so-called “Gang of Eight”, participated in a conspiracy that aspired to overturn the reforms of Gorbachev and avert the signing of the New Union Treaty, planned for the 20th of August, that would end many of their powers and privileges.³⁴

On the 18th of August 1991, the coup, organized by the KGB, started to unfold; Gorbachev was detained in his summer dacha in Crimea where he was on vacation and units of the Soviet Army were transferred into the country’s capital in order to effectuate the orders of the putschists. A limited number of arrests took place, while local Party organizations with the cooperation of the Army claimed control of regional institutions, buildings, TV, and radio stations across the country.³⁵

However, the putschists made a crucial mistake; they failed to detain Boris Yeltsin. This allowed the opposition forces to gather around him, while he and his political allies made a pledge towards the world and particularly the West for political/diplomatic support that they eventually gained.³⁶ It became evident early on, that the coup was badly organized, with the military units participating

³⁰ www.nytimes.com/1991/02/21/world/kremlin-hits-back-at-yeltsin-demand.html

³¹ Ibid

³² soviethistory.msu.edu/1991-2/march-referendum/

³³ www.cer.eu/insights/moscow-coups-1991-who-won-and-why-does-it-still-matter

³⁴ www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/union-sovereign-states

³⁵ Ibid, n. 32

³⁶ www.rferl.org/a/failed-1991-coup-changed-us-diplomatic-approach-to-ussr/27932246.html

not having clear orders about their objectives and being surprised by the massive reaction of plain citizens against them.³⁷

This lack of plan caused convulsive reactions that caused the death of 3 citizens. This was a turning point that sped up the rate of defections of officers, soldiers, and whole units towards the side of the opposition and widespread condemnation of the putsch in USSR and abroad that ended with the return of Gorbachev to Moscow, the triumph of Yeltsin, the arrest of the putschists and the demise of communist institutions which were soon declared out-of-law.³⁸

The Road to Belovezha Forest and Alma Ata: Coordination for Change

The persons responsible for the coup failed to grasp the momentum of history. It was very difficult to present a legitimization argument to a society tasting the first fruits of freedoms, based on the foundations of the Soviet regime itself. The latter had taken power by means of a violent revolution in 1917-1921, exercised terror as a means of political organization with notable examples the interwar purges³⁹ and Holodomor (a man-made famine in Soviet Ukraine from 1932 to 1933 that killed millions of Ukrainians, part of the wider Soviet famine of 1930–1933 which affected the major grain-producing areas of the Soviet Union)⁴⁰, then imposed a certain kind of political-economic organization of neighbouring countries through occupation in the aftermath of WWII. The policy of Glasnost had allowed the disclosure of many previously top-secret events of the Stalinist era. From the point of the coup failure onwards, the road was open to all dissidents of the Soviet regime to negotiate their position against the CPSU and to coordinate between themselves about the future arrangements.

This was the decisive point for inter-soviet relations. Boris Yeltsin, president of the Russian Socialist Republic, who played a key role in the defeat of the putschists, finalized the withdrawal of Russia from Soviet institutions, declared the Party and its activities illegal on Russian soil,⁴¹ and felt free to negotiate and coordinate with the head of two other major republics, Ukraine and Belarus,

³⁷ www.history.com/this-day-in-history/coup-attempt-against-gorbachev-collapses

³⁸ Ibid, n. 32

³⁹ www.thecollector.com/stalin-great-purge-political-rivals/

⁴⁰ holodomor.ca/about-us/

⁴¹ soviethistory.msu.edu/1991-2/the-august-coup/the-august-coup-texts/communist-party-banned/

where the popular sentiment had grown strong against the central government and movements had already emerged.⁴²

The Belovezha Accords is the agreement declaring that the USSR had effectively ceased to exist and established the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in its place. The documentation was signed at the state dacha in Belovezha forest, Belarus on 8 December 1991, by the leaders of three of the four republics (the fourth, the Transcaucasian SFSR was defunct long before) which had signed the 1922 Treaty on the Creation of the USSR: Parliament Chairman Stanislav Shushkevich and Prime Minister Vyacheslav Kebich for Belarus, President Boris Yeltsin and First Deputy Prime Minister Gennady Burbulis for the Russian Federation, and President Leonid Kravchuk and Prime Minister Vitold Fokin for Ukraine.⁴³

The main obligations of the parties to the Agreement,⁴⁴ ratified by all former Soviet republics, except Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, included:

- The end of the existence of the USSR, with the "setting up of lawfully constituted democratic...independent states...on the basis of mutual recognition of and respect for State sovereignty."
- Establishing on the territory the "right to self-determination."
- "The Parties, desirous of facilitating the expression, preservation and development of the distinctive ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious characteristics of the national minorities resident in their territories and of the unique ethno-cultural regions that have come into being, will extend protection to them" (Article 3).
- "Equitable cooperation" (Article 4).
- "Territorial integrity" (Article 5).

There was some dispute over the authority of the leaders of three of the 12 republics to dissolve the entire Union, after the signing of the Accords. However, individual Union republics had the right to secede freely from the Union, according to Article 72 of the 1977 Soviet Constitution.⁴⁵ Of course, the Soviet federal government also argued that the purported dissolution was illegal and ineffective.

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web.archive.org/web/20120624201208/http://www.ukrweekly.com/old/archive/2001/340119.shtml

43 <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-38416657>

44 [www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL\(1994\)054-e](http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL(1994)054-e)

45 soviethistory.msu.edu/1991-2/shevarnadze-resigns/shevarnadze-resigns-texts/law-on-secession-from-the-ussr/

On 21 December 1991, the representatives of 11 of the 12 remaining Soviet republics (except Georgia) signed the Alma-Ata Protocol. The Protocol confirmed both the end of the USSR and the establishment of the CIS. It also arranged for several other practical measures consequential to the extinction of the Union.⁴⁶ Gorbachev resigned as president of USSR a few days later, turning the remaining powers of his office over to Yeltsin and the flag of the Soviet Union was lowered from the Kremlin Senate for the final time, on 25 December 1991.⁴⁷

Russian President Yeltsin informed UN Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar that the Soviet Union had been dissolved and that Russia would, as its successor state, continue the Soviet Union's membership in the United Nations (also agreed at Alma Ata). As no Member State objected, the Russian Federation took the Soviet Union's UN seat.⁴⁸

Closing Remarks

From its very beginning, USSR internal relations were marked by the brutal forces of the revolution and the Civil war that brought the Czar regime to an end. At that time, it was particularly difficult to assess the actual public sentiment towards the new regime. However, the forces of history kept the Union together for more than 70 years. The non-disputed repressions of Stalinism did not allow dissidence on any basis, let alone nationalistic. The main unifying power between the republics appeared to be the Red Army and the collectivization policies. In the end, these also seem to be the main reasons behind the collapse: overspending on military budget⁴⁹, enabled by the strong grip of the Army's leadership on the Party, robbed the society of huge amounts that could contribute to a better quality of life for the people. At the same time, collectivization proved to be counterproductive⁵⁰. This situation drove to scarcity of goods and funds and increased dissatisfaction in the republics that contributed the most to the country's GDP, increasing the frictions and fuelling the nationalist forces that the policy of Glasnost reinforced further, thus opening the road to dissolution.

⁴⁶ [www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL\(1994\)054-e](http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL(1994)054-e)

⁴⁷ www.nytimes.com/1991/12/26/world/end-of-the-soviet-union-on-moscow-s-streets-worry-and-regret.html

⁴⁸ www.ejil.org/pdfs/3/2/2045.pdf

⁴⁹ www.jstor.org/stable/152135

⁵⁰ www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03612759.1992.9949576