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By CRAIG R. WHITNEY Special to The New York Times

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Soviet Disarray: View From the West

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Community Leaders Wonder How Safe They Are With Republics' Assurances

By CRAIG R. WHITNEY
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MAASTRICHT, the Netherlands, Dec. 9 — Since it has been clear for several months that the "mighty, indivisible, indestructible" Soviet Union was a thing of the past, its formal unraveling has not come as an unsettling surprise to Western European leaders trying to decide here today how to knit their own countries more closely together.

The Soviet Union began falling to pieces immediately after President Boris N. Yeltsin of Russia and other leaders of constituent Soviet republics faced down the hard-line coup against President Mikhail S. Gorbachev in August. Though the coup failed, it weakened Mr. Gorbachev, and most West European leaders now apparently believe that his power cannot be restored.

"I think the Soviet Union has been coming apart for a long time, hasn't it?" the British Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, said today. He added that the agreement announced in Brest on Sunday to form a new commonwealth of the three Slavic republics with its capital in Minsk may have been the final blow. "I think it will be some time before we see the new pattern at all clearly," Mr. Hurd said.

Though neither the heads of government nor their foreign ministers spent much time today discussing events in the Soviet Union — the foreign ministers discussed it over dinner, according to their spokesmen — they are not without concern about them. They worry, as they have since last August, about who will insure the control and safety of the Soviet nuclear and conventional arsenal that belonged to Moscow.

Doubts About Assurances

And they cannot yet be sure how seriously to take the assurances of Mr. Yeltsin and the leaders of Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Byelorussia that the nuclear weapons in their territories will remain under strict, joint control.

The British Prime Minister, John Major, described the nuclear question as "critical" today, but another official said: "Reassuring noises are coming out of the Soviet Union. I wouldn't say this is something where there's an urgent concern, but it's something we want to keep on top of."

Mr. Major also said he and others



Agence France-Press

A Protest in Moscow

As Western European leaders met to decide how to knit their own countries more closely together, the Soviet Union continued to unravel. In Moscow,

State-Security officers examined a petition demanding stabilization of prices and protesting President Boris N. Yeltsin's current market reforms.

here would be concerned about human rights and the question of who would take responsibility for Soviet debt.

But a larger question, one overshadowed here today by the problems of how and when to agree on a single European currency and strengthen political cooperation among the 12 European Community member states that their leaders were discussing, is what they can do to channel change in the East into constructive channels.

Impotent in Yugoslav War

Though they are talking about European political union, the community leaders have not yet been able to agree even on any meaningful way of stopping Yugoslavia's long decline into civil war right on their doorsteps, and they do not want to see the Soviet Union become "Yugoslavia with nukes," as the American Secretary of State, James A. Baker 3d, put it in a television interview over the weekend.

A Danish Foreign Ministry official said there was some concern among the leaders here about "total dissolution," and a British official said Mr. Major would send a representative to

Kiev, Minsk and Moscow later this week to size up, among other things, what the Soviet Army planned to do about the latest developments. "Who pays them, and and is there a body that finances them?" this official asked.

Chancellor Helmut Kohl of Germany would like to see the community put together a logistical task force this weekend, putting soldiers, railway workers and other experts in civilian clothes to rush supplies of milk, sugar and other food supplies to cities like Moscow and Leningrad before shortages become so critical that they create social unrest, according to German officials.

But the European Community, long a bulwark against the threat of Soviet Communism, was not designed as protection against its collapse. The foreign ministers will not meet formally to discuss the subject until next Monday in Brussels, according to officials.

One thing they must not do, some of the Europeans feel, is build up such a tightly federated political and economic structure that Eastern European countries, and possibly Ukraine and even Russia one day, will have no hope

of ever becoming a part of what Mr. Gorbachev used to like to call the "common European home."

Requests for Membership

But asked today how the community would deal with a request from Ukraine to join its ranks as a full member, one European official pointed out that Austria had already applied, that the Scandinavian countries probably would soon, and that their applications would be dealt with first. Eastern European countries get only a limited association status and lots of advice.

A \$325 million European Community package of grants to help the Soviet Union avoid economic ruin was delivered to Moscow earlier this year. Now that it appears that the country no longer exists, community officials will probably have to decide where to direct a \$520 million line of credit and \$1.56 billion in credits for food and humanitarian aid that they were still trying to negotiate with Moscow today. A spokesman for the community's Executive Commission in Brussels said the foreign ministers would probably channel these more through the republics.