

## Soviet Disarray: Street Scenes

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As shelves in many of Moscow's state food stores remained empty, imported goods filled a shelf in a display window of a private shop. An elderly pensioner stared wistfully at the items, which were beyond her means.

# But Alas, There's No Union of Minds

By SERGE SCHMEMANN

Special to The New York Times

MOSCOW, Dec. 10 — The following interview was recorded today on a slushy Moscow street: "What's happening in the Union?" a citizen was asked. The man, in his early 40's, replied, "What do you mean by Union?"

The response was not meant to be sarcastic. The man was simply trying to pinpoint which of the various available definitions the questioner had in mind.

At last count there were at least three unions available — the old Soviet Union, the Union of Sovereign States that President Mikhail S. Gorbachev was always trying to get republics to join, and the brand new Commonwealth of Independent States that the leaders of Russia, Ukraine and Byelorussia proclaimed on Sunday.

These could encompass anywhere from 3 to 12 republics, of which all but 2 have declared independence. In addition, the co-founders of the Commonwealth declared the first Union dissolved and the second a nonstarter, and Mr. Gorbachev replied that they lacked the right to do this.

### Yes, There Is a Constitution

In any case, nobody rushed to print new stationery or to look over real estate in Minsk, where the new Commonwealth was to have its capital. In fact, life in Moscow went on pretty much as before, with long lines raising clouds of steam in the wintry dusk.

In most countries, so tangled a conflict of authority would qualify at least as a "constitutional crisis." Indeed, Mr. Gorbachev and other critics of the three Slavic leaders' declaration were quick to invoke the Constitution, as people here often do when they disagree with some development.

One citizen, listening to one of many such claims on television, turned to a foreigner and quietly asked, "Tell me, do we have a Constitution?"

There is one, dating from 1977 with various subsequent amendments, including one enabling Mr. Gorbachev to become President and another canceling the "leading role" assigned to the Communist Party.

But that was hardly the point. In a way few foreigners could fully appreciate, legality was a side issue in the convulsions of a mortally wounded empire. In the awesome struggle over the fate of this vast land, terms like "constitution," "sovereignty," "independence" and "democracy" served as political banners rather than as legal definitions.

"Independence, independence," said President Boris N. Yeltsin of Russia after being pushed on Ukraine's status by a reporter. "There are many different forms of independence. We still have to see what kind this is."

### The 'Field of Miracles'

Despite the demoralizing shortages that now order so much of their lives, Muscovites were quick to appreciate the ironies of the new situation.

"I woke up and — Hello, ain't no Soviet power . . ." was the headline in the cheeky Komsomolskaya Pravda, drawn from an old underground song. Underneath was an outline of the three Slavic republics, marked "Field of Miracles."

The commentary in the paper began: "Waking up on Monday, we dis-

## A crisis that goes beyond politics to the very sense of identity of the people.

covered that we were denizens of yet another governmental formation, if we can put it that way. We had lived — Oh, how we lived — in the U.S.S.R., we managed to spend a pair of weeks in the 'U.S.S.' and yesterday we became residents of the 'C.I.S.' with the capital in Minsk. Tomorrow, perhaps, we'll be made settlers in another '—S.' This was a reference to the abbreviation for Soyuz, which means union.

Yet the fact that Muscovites carried on with their lives or managed to quip about the latest dramatic twist in the extraordinary saga of their history did not mean they were indifferent. Far from it, as the hungry perusal of newspapers and television news and the intense talk all over the city testified.

### Beyond Politics

The reason their reaction differs from what Westerners would expect or do, said Viktor Yerofeyev, a novelist and critic who has spent considerable time in the West, is that the crisis goes beyond politics and governmental organization, to the very sense of identity of the people

"All this is not comprehensible to

Westerners because they have never lived in a system which claimed to be creating a perfect new man, which celebrated the possibility of man," Mr. Yerofeyev said.

"You are only asked by your state to be yourself. But here the collapse has created a crisis of humanism, the collapse of the state has left man small, humiliated, vulnerable. That's why people sometimes seem indifferent, why political proclamations are taken more broadly."

What is happening, in other words, is the search for an entirely new identity, not simply a new political organization. And reports from around Moscow indicated that the Commonwealth proposed by the three Slavic leaders was rapidly gaining adherents.

On the surface, the Commonwealth differs little from Mr. Gorbachev's Union of Sovereign States. But Mr. Gorbachev and his Union had reached a dead end because however they were presented, they smacked of the multinational empire whose binding glue had been "Communist internationalism," the ideology used to squelch national sovereignty and control the empire.

However Mr. Gorbachev tries to evade the symbols of the old order, he represents the notion that the interest of the state is greater than the ambitions of its parts. It is an argument that republics and nations, most notably Ukraine, now find unacceptable.

### Back to the Beginnings

By contrast, the Commonwealth proposed by Mr. Yeltsin, along with President Leonid M. Kravchuk of Ukraine and President Stanislav Shushkevich of Byelorussia, goes back to the beginnings, to an association of three Slavic nations that others would be invited to join as distinct nations.

"I've been lying in bed sick and talking to friends, and I find we're all very happy at what's happening," said Yevgeny Popov, a short-story writer from Siberia. "It's like the communal apartment we all grew up in. Everybody hated each other, there was one bathroom for seven families, there was always a K.G.B. informer, a loud drunk, filth. We hated not because we were bad, but because of the condition.

"But when everybody was resettled in their own apartments, everybody started visiting each other, calling by phone, standing in line together."

"It's the same thing here. Gorbachev was trying to keep everybody in one apartment and the hatreds were building — Russia and Ukraine were about to go at it. But the Yeltsin proposal works out fine for everybody — nationalists get their countries, the army gets paid, Communists have their state, and we can all start standing in line together."

### 'The Only Way'

The notion seemed widely shared in Moscow that Mr. Gorbachev had exhausted his mission and that Mr. Yeltsin had discovered the one path that avoided a disastrous break with Ukraine and returned the union to a Slavic core from which it could start to rebuild.

"The Minsk meeting found the only way to save the country — not the Soviet Union, but some historic and idealistic country generally known as Russia," Mr. Yerofeyev said. "I am amazed that they found this radical but absolutely correct direction."

Aleksandr S. Tsipko, a political philosopher, said, "It wasn't expected, of course, and this action proves Yeltsin's great political talents." But he noted, as did most commentators, that Mr. Gorbachev could still mount a powerful resistance, especially if the army leaned his way. "As of today we have quite a new political situation, and the world community must be prepared for another act of this great Russian drama," Mr. Tsipko said.

And yet, was the proclamation of a Commonwealth and the dissolution of the Union legal or constitutional?

"But is it necessary to talk of law when revolutions, or when events equal to revolution, are under way?" asked Yuri Feofanov in Izvestia. "I would like to ask those who protest against the Minsk 'plot': What in the declaration of the Three afflicts the rights of people and nations? And were they guaranteed in the Soyuz that has vanished in history and that some still seek to reanimate?"