

GORBACHEV VYING FOR ARMY BACKING OVER YELTSIN'S BID

KEY TO POWER STRUGGLE

2 Slavic Republics, in a Rebuff to the Soviet Chief, Ratify Commonwealth Accord

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MOSCOW, Dec. 10 — As President Mikhail S. Gorbachev's waning authority headed for a critical and perhaps final test in the Russian Parliament on Thursday, he and President Boris N. Yeltsin of Russia appeared today to be vying for the support of the Soviet military, ultimately the key to any power struggle.

As they did, the Parliaments of Ukraine and Byelorussia today firmly rebuffed Mr. Gorbachev's efforts to keep the Soviet Union alive by ratifying the treaty that their leaders signed with Mr. Yeltsin on Sunday to create a commonwealth of former Soviet republics.

Stressing Mr. Gorbachev's title as Commander in Chief of the armed forces, the press agency Tass tonight reported that the Soviet President met this afternoon with military officials at the Defense Ministry, while the Russian press agency said Mr. Yeltsin would be meeting Wednesday morning with regional commanders.

Sparring for Control

At a news conference today, Gennadi Burbulis, State Secretary of the Russian republic, said the armed forces were under the command of the Soviet Defense Minister, Marshal Yevgeny I. Shaposhnikov, who on Sunday welcomed the proposal for a single "strategic military" space, under the aegis of the Commonwealth of Independent States.

Mr. Gorbachev's meeting at the Defense Ministry was scheduled before the signing of the commonwealth agreement, but it took on new meaning as he and Mr. Yeltsin again began to spar over the shape the crumbling Soviet nation should take.

The newspaper Izvestia commented today that the army would serve whoever supports it and that now, with the union budget shrinking, its attention necessarily turns to the three republics

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2 Slavic Republics Ratify Commonwealth Pact

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that carry most of the Soviet military burden.

"The final fate of the country and of this project depends on who will be supported by the army," said Vitaly Korotich, former editor of the magazine Ogonyok. "On the one hand, Gorbachev has the football with the nuclear keys and he is the Commander in Chief. On the other hand, Yeltsin has summoned the commanders of military district, obviously not to play chess with them."

If as expected the Russian Parliament on Thursday backs Mr. Yeltsin's projected commonwealth then Mr. Gorbachev's days as leader of a Soviet state will be numbered, with the old structures of a strong central power replaced by the loose ties of a community of nations.

"The answer to the question will be known soon," said Georgi K. Shkna-zarov, a top adviser to Mr. Gorbachev, when a group of young political leaders asked him today about the fate of Mr. Gorbachev and his team. "It is totally tied to the fate of the union. If the union is preserved, there will be a place for the President. If not, then there is nothing to talk about."

The budding confrontation between Mr. Yeltsin and Mr. Gorbachev — long-time foes who turned allies after the August coup — is once again the backdrop for the Soviet political drama. As the debate over the fate of the union heated up, both sides accused each other of being shortsighted and leading the country toward a "Yugoslav style" civil war.

"This is the only and possibly the last opportunity to avoid what has happened in Yugoslavia," said Andrei Koz'yev, the Russian Foreign Minister, describing the commonwealth proposal at a news conference today. "What is offered as an alternative ignores the desire for independence which has been expressed by an overwhelming majority in Ukraine."

Gorbachev Fights On

For the second day since the three Slavic leaders declared the Soviet Union dead, Mr. Gorbachev stayed out of public view, while his proposal to call a special session of the Congress of People's Deputies ran into rising legal confusion. Some argued that the congress, stripped of its authority by Mr. Gorbachev in the weeks after the failed

coup of August, had no power, while others noted that if Ukraine, Russia and Byelorussia boycotted the session, it could not gather a quorum of its 2,250 members.

But even with the tide of events running against him, Mr. Gorbachev was still fighting for his job and for his vision of a renewed, democratic union of confederated states that would retain some vestiges of Soviet statehood.

According to the newspaper Vechernaya Moskov, Mr. Gorbachev in a telephone conversation with President Leonid M. Kravchuk of Ukraine accused the three Slavic leaders of carrying out a "coup d'état" of their own. In a public statement Wednesday, he challenged the legal premise of the Presidents' declaration, which he said had bypassed local and union parliaments.

The three Slavic leaders have proposed a commonwealth that would re-

Doubts about a Commander in Chief's control.

tain a single currency and economic space, and a single strategic-military command. Membership in the commonwealth is open to all republics, including the newly independent Baltic states, members of the Russian government said today.

Message: You're Finished

As their first joint action, the three republics announced they would coordinate a plan to liberalize prices on Jan. 2, which for Russia meant a two-week delay on a methodical timetable for economic reform. Russia's Deputy Prime Minister, Egor Gaidar, said the republics also agreed to hold down spending, and to put a ceiling on budget deficits.

Ukraine has agreed to postpone plans to introduce its own currency, and already in the days since the signing of the agreement has stepped up its delivery of food to Russia, in particular to Moscow.

Members of the Russian leadership today referred to Mr. Gorbachev in respectful tones, but their clear message was that his era was finished. Mr. Burbulis said Mr. Gorbachev's "substantial experience in political life"

would still be useful in the future but that his new role would have to be determined by the Commonwealth's member states.

According to the Russian leadership, the idea for a commonwealth evolved as the three Slavic leaders met last weekend at a government rest house outside the Byelorussian town of Brest, to discuss relations in the aftermath of Ukraine's vote for independence on Dec. 1.

Mr. Burbulis said other options were initially discussed, including a proposal that would have allowed Ukraine to join a new union for a limited period of time.

"We came to Minsk without a text and without any carefully weighed idea of a commonwealth," said Mr. Burbulis. "It was born right there."

He emphasized that the creation of the commonwealth was still underway and that the dissolution of the union is not complete. In the agreement, he noted, it was written that the Soviet Union "ceases its existence." Mr. Burbulis said: "If this was a coup, we would have written 'ceased.' We wanted to emphasize that this is a process."

Nursultan A. Nazarbayev, President of Kazakhstan, who was inaugurated today after winning a voters' mandate last week, again expressed his displeasure at being excluded from the Brest meetings.

"To our great sorrow, leaders of a number of former Soviet republics equated sovereignty and autarchy," said Mr. Nazarbayev, whose republic, with a Slavic majority, is considered a key link to the four Central Asian republics.

Interested Republics

Pavel Voshchanov, a spokesman for Mr. Yeltsin, said today that the Russian President had telephoned Mr. Nazarbayev on Sunday morning and invited him to the meeting in Brest before the agreement on a commonwealth was actually signed.

"We had a room ready for him," said Mr. Voshchanov, adding that the Kazakh President later changed his mind, apparently choosing to side instead with Mr. Gorbachev and the union.

Since the Sunday announcement, several republics have expressed interest in taking part in the new commonwealth, including Armenia, Moldavia, and the newly independent state of Lithuania. But in Uzbekistan, President Islam A. Karimov criticized the three leaders for what he called their ethnocentricity.



Agence France-Presse

As President Mikhail S. Gorbachev and President Boris N. Yeltsin of Russia seemed to be vying for the support of the Soviet military, rallies were held

in Moscow by supporters of both. Pro-Yeltsin demonstrators shouted at Soviet Union backers, who opposed the creation of a new commonwealth.