

# Soviet republics express interest in new union

SEVERAL republics have indicated an interest in joining the new commonwealth of Slavic states, a Russian official said. The Russian deputy prime minister, Mr Gennadi Burbulis, said Armenia, Kirghizstan and the Baltic states of Estonia and Lithuania had shown an interest in joining Russia, Ukraine and Byelarus in the new union.

The President of Kazakhstan, Mr Nursultan Nazarbayev, is prepared to sign the new accord, the independent news agency, Interfax, reported yesterday.

Mr Nazarbayev expressed his readiness to join the three Slavic republics in the new commonwealth during a telephone conversation with a senior Russian official, the report said, quoting well-informed sources in the Russian parliament.

The report said Mr Nazarbayev had told Mr Burbulis that he would be prepared to sign the Minsk accord as a "co-founder" of the commonwealth.

Interfax said Mr Nazarbayev was planning to call a meeting soon of leaders of the central Asian republics.

The Russian President, Mr Boris Yeltsin, plans to travel to the Kazakhstan capital, Alma Ata, on Saturday for talks with Mr Nazarbayev that could also include the leaders of Kirghizstan, Turkmenistan and other republics.

Kazakhstan, a vast republic of 16 million divided between ethnic Russians and Kazakhs, would give the commonwealth almost full economic and military might of the old Soviet Union, including its remaining nuclear weapons.

Azerbaijan welcomed an agreement by Russia, Ukraine and Byelarus, but warned that the accord most not slow down the process of independence of republics formerly grouped in the Soviet Union.

The Azeri State Council,

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headed by President Ayaz Mutalibov, believes that the agreement reached on Sunday in Minsk must be studied carefully.

The make-up of the new commonwealth and relations between member states would be closely scrutinised and discussed by the Azeri parliament "if need arises", a council statement said.

The Moldovan President, Mr Mircea Snegur, and Mr Yeltsin are to discuss Sunday's agreement in talks in Moscow today.

The agreement between the three Slavic republics is a "very important document" because Moldova borders Ukraine. Mr Snegur was quoted as saying.

Mr Snegur's election on Sunday was generally seen as an endorsement of the Romanian-speaking republic's proclamation of independence on August 27th.

However, the single overriding concern being expressed by republics this week was that the new commonwealth would emerge as a Slavic superstate, despite assurances from the leaders of Russia, Ukraine and Byelarus, that any republic agreeing with their goals was welcome.

Concern among Central Asian republics over the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the emerging commonwealth prompted the President of Turkmenistan, Mr Saparmurad Niyazov, to call a meeting today that would include Tadjikistan, Uzbekistan, Kirghizia, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, according to the Turkemistan press service.

Some republics shared Mr Gorbachev's concerns about the creation of the three-republic alli-

ance and wondered where that left the other nine.

"It is necessary to think of the fate of everybody, not only of those who live in these three republics," said Uzbekistan's President, Mr Islam Karimov.

"The fate of the union was sooner or later to be decided by the Slavic states since these three republics, along with the trans-Caucasian republics, founded the union in 1922," Kirghizstan's President, Mr Askar Akaev, said yesterday at his inauguration. For Kerghia, the issue is what union will the republic be in?"

Georgia has said little about the commonwealth, but its President, Mr Zviad Gamsakhurdia, told a rally in Tblisi that he did not know why a new union was needed.

Armenia, which has been fighting with neighbouring Azerbaijan and has a border with Turkey, does not fit neatly into a union of either Slavic or Islamic states.

Mr Mintimer Shaimiyev, president of Tatarstan, a Tatar region inside the Russian republic, voiced concerns that the commonwealth would lead to a Slavic union and an Islamic union side-by-side and create confrontations and instability. Other ethnic minorities inside Russia also expressed concerns.

The Ukrainian President, Mr Leonid Kravchuk, said the commonwealth was open for other republics to join. He invited the newly independent Baltic states, which expressed little interest, and even mentioned independent Bulgaria, another Slavic country, as a possible member.

While most Soviet republics were debating the future of the union, Azerbaijan delegates were in Senegal, seeking to join other Muslim countries as a member of the Islamic Conference under sponsorship of its southern neighbour, Iran. — (AFP, UPI)



Leading his home-made cart, an Armenian man returns his family to Stepanokhert, in Nagorno-Karabakh, after fleeing heavy fighting earlier in the week. A referendum on independence was held on Tuesday in the disputed region, an Armenian enclave in Azerbaijan. — (AFP/ Vassili Shaposhnikov).