

Soviet Union has just 14 days left

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President Gorbachev . . . almost totally denuded of power

From Seamus Martin, in Moscow

THE Soviet Union will cease to exist by the end of the year, according to President Boris Yeltsin's press secretary, Mr Pavel Voschanov. An agreement to dissolve the union had been reached between President Yeltsin and President Gorbachev, Mr Voschanov said.

The red flag would be taken down from the Kremlin on New Year's Eve, and the Kremlin itself would come under Russian control, he added.

Mr Voschanov was speaking following a meeting in the Kremlin yesterday between President Yeltsin of Russia and President Gorbachev, who is now almost totally denuded of power.

Accepting his inevitable loss of power and his status as president of a non-existent state, Mr

Gorbachev told reporters: "I cannot go against the current."

By the end of the year, some of the union structures would have been transferred to Russia, Mr Voschanov said, and others would be abolished.

The statement ran contrary, not only to an announcement earlier yesterday by Mr Gorbachev's press secretary, Mr Andrei Grachev, but also to a statement on Monday by Mr Yeltsin himself that the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) would come into operation in mid-January.

It now appears that either the CIS will come into effect earlier than expected, putting severe pressure on Kazakhstan and the

Yeltsin and Gorbachev agree to 'dissolution' on New Year's Eve

central Asian republics to conclude a deal, or there will be a dangerous power vacuum from the end of the year until the date of the CIS's formal establishment.

But in the past weeks, leaders here seem to have been making up the rules as they go along. It should be remembered that on December 8th, the leaders of the newly-founded CIS issued a statement announcing that the Soviet Union had ceased to exist from that date.

They then rowed back on that announcement and there may be a number of adjustments up to the time that the full CIS, with a membership of perhaps nine republics, comes into existence.

One of the main problems for the central Asians is the fear that the removal of price controls in Russia, Ukraine and Byelarus will cause an instant and massive outflow of food and consumer goods from their republics in which prices are already considerably lower than in the Slavic areas.

At least some of them are expected to push for a revised date for the freeing of prices. This had originally been set by Russia for December 16th, but was put back to January 2nd in the interests of Ukraine and Byelarus.

Some tough negotiations will take place, therefore, on Saturday in Alma Ata where leaders of all

12 republics will meet, and Mr Grachev hinted that even Mr Gorbachev might attend, depending on the nature of the meeting. If it bears the form of a state council meeting, then he will attend. If it is a meeting of the heads of republics then, not being one of them, he will not attend, he said.

In any event, Mr Gorbachev would send propositions to the meeting concerning defence issues, bodies controlling the command and use of the country's military potential as well as other matters.

The Soviet military meanwhile, has assured the US Secretary of State, Mr James Baker, that it is not planning a coup, and will stay out of politics during the transition period to the new commonwealth, a US official said yesterday.

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President Yeltsin . . . press secretary says agreement reached