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THE REALIZATION OF INDEPENDENCE AND INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION

Consolidating independence

Before the Ukrainian parliament formally resumed its work after the summer recess, Kravchuk made a brief visit on 2 September 1991 to Moscow to attend the opening of the Congress of USSR People's Deputies. By now various other republics had also declared their independence and Gorbachev had to agree to more concessions in order to persuade them to sign a new Union treaty. Kravchuk put his signature to an agreement signed by Gorbachev and the leaders of the republics which, according to the explanation that the Ukrainian leader presented to his parliament, called for the preparation and signing of a treaty on a 'union of sovereign states', but by states 'which wanted a treaty', and on their terms. In his address to the Congress and at a press conference in Moscow, the Ukrainian leader made it clear that Ukraine was going to wait until after the results of its referendum were known before considering any new Union treaty, and then only if the proposed new Union was a confederation.¹ But the mere fact that he had signed such a document, which also called for the creation of an economic community of the republics,² got some of the national democrats worried about what he was up to.

On 3 September, the Ukrainian parliament demonstrated that it was serious about taking charge of defence and security matters by endorsing the appointment of a minister of defence. He was forty-seven-year-old Major-General Kostyantyn Morozov, a Russian, who was the commander of the air forces deployed in Ukraine. He was instructed to draw up plans for the creation of a republican guard

Radio Kyiv, 3 September 1991.

Published in *Izvestiya*, 2 September 1991.

and a national army. To forestall the removal of military equipment from the republic, during the next few days the parliament's Presidium forbade the redeployment of troops within Ukraine without permission of the Ukrainian authorities, and the withdrawal from the republic of weapons and military property. It also issued a decree on Ukraine assuming control over the MVD and border troops stationed on its territory.³ Interestingly, Soviet television announced on 10 September that a division of KGB special forces based in Kharkiv had requested the Ukrainian government to be included in the republic's republican guard.

While the planning and preparations for the creation of national armed forces proceeded, and the debate about what to do with the nuclear weapons on Ukraine's territory intensified, the parliament continued with its important work of preparing or adopting new legislation on a range of subjects connected with state-building. For example, it began finalizing the draft law on citizenship and, on 24 September, abolished the old republican KGB structure and created in its place a new National Security Service responsible, until the election of the president, to the head of parliament.

There was also considerable activity in the sphere of foreign relations-. During September, Foreign Minister Zlenko undertook an official visit to Poland and, among others, French, Canadian and American officials visited Kyiv. A Ukrainian parliamentary delegation travelled to Chisinau and its talks with Moldovan parliamentarians helped pave the way for regularizing relations with another of Ukraine's neighbours. This was an important step because of potential border disputes between the two states and because 600,000 Ukrainians constituted Moldova's largest national minority, and some of them had been caught up in the conflict between Chisinau and the breakaway Transdnister enclave.

But the most significant development in the external sphere was Kravchuk's visit at the end of September to North America, and his brief stopover in France on the way back. The trip provided a splendid opportunity to win greater international recognition and support for Ukraine. It began with a successful three-day official visit to Canada, included a meeting with President Bush in Washington and culminated with the Ukrainian leader's address to the UN General Assembly on 30 September. Kravchuk used the latter

¹ Ukrinform-TASS, 10 September 1991.

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occasion to introduce independent Ukraine to an organization of which, paradoxically, it had been a founding member but in which, for over forty-five years, it had not been able to speak with its own voice. Ukraine, he told the delegates, was committed to democracy, international cooperation and disarmament. It had no territorial claims on any of its neighbours and did not recognize any claims to its own territory. He affirmed that in accordance with its Declaration of State Sovereignty, Ukraine did not seek to possess nuclear weapons and intended to join the Non-Proliferation Treaty as a non-nuclear state. The Ukrainian leader also let it be known, however, that Ukraine was no longer prepared to leave disarmament issues to Moscow, explaining that his country wanted to become 'directly involved in the disarmament negotiating process'.⁴

Having also met with France's President Mitterrand on the return leg, Kravchuk returned home evidently imbued with new confidence and determination to uphold Ukraine's interests. He told a news conference on 4 October that 'we cannot agree to one republic taking over all the nuclear weapons. We cannot disregard our security'. For the time being, he called for a dual key system of control over the nuclear arms on Ukraine's territory, which would provide a mechanism for Kyiv to veto any use of them; he also reiterated Ukraine's wish to have its own seat at all future negotiations on nuclear disarmament.⁵

With domestic attention within Ukraine beginning to focus more and more on the approaching referendum and presidential election, from now on official Kyiv began to manifest more and more its lack of interest in being drawn into any new Union structures and that Ukraine was preoccupied with state-building and preparing the ground for recognition as a full-fledged independent country. On 7 October, for instance, Soviet Constitution Day was not observed in the republic. On the following day, the Verkhovna Rada finally adopted a law on citizenship which was non-discriminating and granted citizenship to everyone resident in Ukraine at the time. Three days later, the parliament agreed on the wording of the question to be asked in the referendum: 'Do you endorse the Act of the Declaration of Ukrainian Independence?' This cleared the

⁴ For the text of his speech, see *The Ukrainian Weekly*, 6 October 1991.

⁵ Reuter, 4 October 1991.

way for the launch of an official campaign to secure a yes vote in the referendum.

Also on 11 October, deputies gave their backing to a 'Concept of Defence and the Building of the Armed Forces of Ukraine' as the basis for a draft law on this subject which was published in the press five days later. It affirmed Ukraine's intention 'gradually' to become a neutral and non-nuclear state, to build its own armed forces from Soviet conventional troops based in Ukraine, on the basis of 'reasonable sufficiency' and numbering about 420,000 personnel (in other words, that they should be no larger than 0.9% of the population), and that strategic forces on Ukraine's territory would remain under the unified control of a system of collective strategic defence. One other noteworthy measure connected with ensuring the security of the new state and decided on that same day was the extension of Article 62 of the Ukrainian Criminal Code to prohibit activity aimed at undermining the territorial integrity of Ukraine. The penalties provided for up to three years' imprisonment for individuals found guilty of this offence and seven for repeated offenders or members of organized groups.⁶

In Moscow, preparations were hurriedly being made for the signing of a treaty establishing an economic community and rather tactlessly Gorbachev was at pains to link it with a renewed political Union. Speaking on Soviet television on 12 October about what he described as plans to create 'a Union state' with 'a new centre', he went out of his way to emphasize that Ukraine was 'an irreplaceable factor in the building of our Union'. Revealing the extent to which he misunderstood the mood in Ukraine, he declared: 'I cannot think of a Union without Ukraine. I cannot think of it and I cannot imagine it. I think that they understand this in Ukraine as well.' After all, he argued yet again, had not the voters in the March referendum come out in favour of the Union?⁷

In fact, the Ukrainian leadership could take heart from the results of the polls being carried out to provide an indication of how Ukraine's voters were likely to cast their ballots in the approaching referendum. For instance, on 15 October Radio Kyiv announced that a poll conducted by the Association of Sociologists in Ukraine

⁶ Radio Kyiv, 11 October 1991.

See Roman Solchanyk, 'Ukraine, the Kremlin and the Russian White House', *Report on the USSR*, no. 44 (1 November 1991), p. 14.

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estimated that almost 87% of the voters would cast their ballot in favour of independence. Displaying a quiet confidence and sticking determinedly to its principled position, therefore, the Ukrainian leadership and parliament resisted the new pressure emanating from Moscow. On 17 October, the very eve of the signing of the economic pact, Ukraine snubbed the old centre: Kravchuk announced that Ukraine was not prepared to sign the agreement and stayed away from the signing ceremony, sending Fokin and Plyushch as observers. This did not mean that Ukraine had no interest in the pact and it indicated that it would continue negotiations to secure some fundamental adjustments to the arrangement which would make it closer, as Kravchuk and other Ukrainian representatives put it, to the model of the European Economic Community.

When the revamped USSR Supreme Soviet opened on 21 October, Ukrainian representatives were conspicuously absent. This prompted Gorbachev, Yeltsin and the leaders of seven other republics to appeal to the Ukrainian parliament to participate *in* the preparation of a new Union treaty. But the Ukrainian parliament was adamant and the extent of its concessionary response was to send a group of observers to the upper chamber of the USSR Supreme Soviet, the Council of the Republics.

This unrequited 'wooing' of Ukraine, however, was taking place against the background of rising tensions connected with the reaction to Ukraine's moves to establish its own armed forces and the uncertainty over the fate of the Soviet nuclear arsenal on Ukrainian territory. In fact, as the Ukrainian leadership was discovering, some 15% of the USSR's nuclear weapons were deployed in Ukraine, including about 3,000 tactical nuclear arms and 176 ICBMs (inter-continental ballistic missiles, that is, strategic nuclear weapons), with 1,240 warheads. This made Ukraine potentially the world's third largest nuclear state, with a nuclear arsenal larger than those of the United Kingdom, France and China combined. The huge costs and considerable dangers connected with eliminating these weapons — Ukraine did not have the technical facilities to dismantle the nuclear warheads — were also becoming more apparent. As for the former Soviet conventional forces stationed in Ukraine, while the number of actual military personnel based in the republic turned out to be a few hundred thousands less than initially thought even with a more realistic strength of some 750,000, this force constituted the second

largest army in Europe after Russia's, and was larger than the British and French forces combined. Moreover, because Ukraine was one of the major Soviet staging areas against the West, the troops stationed in the republic were well equipped with tanks, armoured vehicles, artillery, helicopters and aircraft and reasonably well trained.

Hardly surprisingly, Ukraine's moves to build its own armed forces drew a particularly irate response from the Soviet military. The impression formed in Kyiv was that Moscow was deliberately playing on Western fears of Ukraine wanting to establish itself as a nuclear power and planning to build a huge army that would upset the military balance in Europe. Indeed, the military issue, and especially that of nuclear arms, increasingly began to complicate Ukraine's burgeoning foreign relations as the latter found itself under increasing pressure to leave the nuclear weapons on its territory under Moscow's sole control or to transfer them to Russia.

Matters were not helped when on 20 October *Moskovskie novosti* published a sensational report claiming that Yeltsin had discussed with his military advisers the possibility of a pre-emptive nuclear strike against Ukraine. The Russian president's rather clumsy response — 'Totally absurd. I discussed this question with military officials; technically it is absolutely impossible' — was hardly reassuring."

On the next day, 21 October, addressing the USSR Supreme Soviet and aiming specifically at Ukraine, Gorbachev warned against the 'nationalization' of Soviet armed forces deployed in the republics, describing such moves as dangerous and irresponsible. Ignoring Ukraine's Declaration of Independence, he also threatened to annul such legislation as anti-constitutional. Undeterred, on the following day, the Ukrainian parliament approved a package of laws covering the creation of a Ukrainian army, navy, air force, national guard and border troops, as well as a law on Ukraine's state borders.¹⁴ In his report to the parliament Defence Minister Morozov emphasized that the creation of the armed forces would be carried out gradually in cooperation and agreement with the Soviet General Staff and USSR Defence Ministry.

¹⁴ *Moskovskie novosti*, 20 October 1991; and *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 24 October 1991. See also John Lloyd and Chrystia Freeland, 'Ukraine Accuses Yeltsin of Nuclear Strike Threat', *Financial Times*, 25 October 1991.

¹⁵ Radio Kyiv, 22 October 1991.

On top of the furor caused by the article in *Moskovskie novosti* and Gorbachev's threats, official Kyiv was especially irritated when TASS issued what *The Times* described as 'heavily distorted' reports about the debate in the Ukrainian parliament, suggesting that Ukraine had voted to 'nationalize' the strategic nuclear missile force on its territory. These 'erroneous' reports, as Reuters called them, increased alarm in the West.¹⁰ Ukrainian officials protested against what the deputy chairman of the Ukrainian parliament Hrynov claimed was 'disinformation'. 'We are being depicted as a state that wants to blackmail the world,' he declared. 'These allegations are groundless.'¹¹ But the damage had been done and on 24 October the Ukrainian parliament felt compelled to adopt a statement clarifying Ukraine's position. It reaffirmed Ukraine's commitment to becoming a non-nuclear state as soon as was feasible; but it also insisted that, until the nuclear weapons based on Ukraine's territory were destroyed (rather than handed over to Russia), Ukraine should exercise some form of joint control over them for the purpose of ensuring their non-use.¹² Ukraine's leaders, who by now had also realized how expensive and complicated the elimination of nuclear weapons on their territory would be, appealed for Western financial and technical assistance to destroy them.

In view of all these latest developments, it was hardly surprising that the Ukraine parliament remained intransigent. On 25 October, by an overwhelming vote, it adopted a resolution declaring that it considered it inappropriate for Ukraine to participate in any inter-republican structure that could lead to its inclusion in another state.¹³

The presidential and referendum campaigns

By now the presidential election was getting into full swing. More than ninety hopefuls initially sought to collect the 100,000 signatures required by law by 20 October for their registration as candidates. Eventually, only seven managed to achieve this and one of them — Oleksander Tkachenko, the minister of agriculture — subsequently

Robert Seely, 'Ukraine Denies Plan to "Nationalize" Missiles', *77/c Times*, and Reuter, 24 October 1991.

Seely, 'Ukraine Denies . . .'

¹² Radio Kyiv, 25 October, and *Silski visti*, 26 October 1991.

¹³ Ukrinform-TASS, 25 October 1991.

withdrew from the contest in favour of Kravchuk. Significantly, all of the final six candidates supported independence, democracy and moving towards a market economy. For weeks they travelled the length and breadth of the republic promoting these ideas. The Ukrainian media, enjoying the greater freedom that came after the Communist debacle in August, also focused on the candidates and their platforms.

Apart from Kravchuk, the other presidential contenders were former political prisoners Chornovil and Lukyanenko, leading democratic figures Yukhnovsky and Hrynov, and the least known of them — Leopold Taburyansky, a Russian-speaking engineer and deputy from Dnipropetrovsk, who was a supporter of private enterprise and the leader of the small Ukrainian People's Party. As the initial polls indicated, Kravchuk was the clear favourite, maintaining a comfortable lead over his nearest rival, Chornovil. Although he was preoccupied with the affairs of state, Kravchuk had the distinct advantage of support from the 'official' establishment and former partocracy, complete with the former Communist-controlled media, which were now in the process of a changeover to a pro-independence mode. He also gained from the fact that the democratic camp failed to rally around a single candidate, thereby weakening its prospects and only exposing the growing divisions within it. Chornovil, for instance, who was nominated by the Galician Assembly, managed to win endorsement from Rukh's Grand Council, yet quite a few of Rukh's leaders, including Drach, Mykhailo Horyn and Porovsky, came out for Lukyanenko, while the idiosyncratic militant, Khmara, backed Taburyansky.

Because of the pro-independence orientation of all the candidates, the presidential campaign undoubtedly played a considerable role in shaping attitudes for the forthcoming referendum. With so much depending on the outcome of the referendum, the Ukrainian authorities threw the full weight of the fledgling independent state behind the campaign to persuade voters, especially in the south and east, to vote for independence. While the former Communist structures and their organs now extolled the virtues of independence, the patriotic and democratic forces also endeavoured to ensure that the referendum, which by no means all of them had welcomed, would finally clinch their country's freedom. Moreover, the largely negative or even hostile coverage which developments

in Ukraine received during this period in the central 'Soviet' media, and the strong criticism of the republic's stance from Gorbachev and various Russian political and military leaders, seems to have irritated the Ukrainian population and worked to the advantage of the advocates of independence.

There were a number of regions, though, where problems arose. Of course, the outcome of the voting in Crimea was not something the Ukrainian leadership could feel comfortable about. In fact, on 22 November an extraordinary session of the Crimean parliament adopted a controversial referendum law which appeared to open the way for a future local poll on secession from Ukraine. Meanwhile, in the Transcarpathian region, where the Ruthenian movement for autonomy had been growing, the regional council decided to hold a local referendum on this issue simultaneously with the republican one. After some bargaining, Kravchuk was able to persuade the council to revise its question and to replace a reference to autonomy with the words: 'the status of a special self-governing administrative territory.' Also in Transcarpathia, in the Beregovo district, where Hungarians form a compact majority, the district council decided to hold a local poll on the formation of a Hungarian autonomous district.¹⁴ The Chernivtsi regional council also decided to pose its own question to voters on 1 December asking them if they wanted a special economic status for their region.

There were other problems which complicated relations with its two south-western neighbours. A few days before the referendum, the Romanian parliament renewed Bucharest's claims to territory that had been annexed from Romania by the Soviet Union as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The territorial dispute predated the Nazi-Soviet agreement and in 1918–20 Ukrainians had protested against what they considered to be Romania's annexation of ethnically Ukrainian districts in Bessarabia and Bukovyna. After the assertion of their republic's sovereignty, the Ukrainian authorities had rejected Romania's territorial claims. On 28 November, however, the Romanian parliament challenged Ukraine's right to conduct a referendum in what it described as 'Romanian territories' in parts of the Chernivtsi and Odesa regions.

See Roman Solchanyk, 'Centrifugal Movements in Ukraine on the Eve of the Independence Referendum', *Report on the USSR*, vol. 3, no. 48 (29 November 1991), pp. 8–12, and his 'The Politics of State Building'.

Consequently, Zlenko cancelled an official visit to Romania which had been scheduled for the following day.¹⁵

Meanwhile, in adjacent Moldova, where the Moldovan Popular Front had initially also revived territorial claims against Ukraine, the conflict with the self-proclaimed and staunchly pro-Union 'Dniester (or Transdnierster) Republic' was intensifying. The latter was backed by ultra-nationalist forces in Russia and the presence of the Soviet 14th Army in the breakaway region raised the possibility of more direct Russian involvement.

The 'Dniester Republic' occupied territory on the left bank of the River Dniester ('Transdnierstra') which before 1940 had administratively been part of Soviet Ukraine; although Russians had flooded in during the post-war period as industry was developed, both Moldovans and Ukrainians still outnumbered them, constituting about 40% and 28% respectively of the enclave's roughly 600,000-strong population. Deprived until very recently of basic cultural facilities (the Moldovan government had sought to allay fears of forcible Romanization and had adopted a liberal policy towards Moldova's national minorities) the Ukrainian population in Moldova had been heavily Russified and the first Ukrainian cultural societies were just appearing. On the Ukrainian side of the border, too, there were sizable 'Romanian' and 'Moldovan' minorities—the rather artificial distinction between the two groups had been officially fostered during the Soviet period—which in 1989 numbered 325,000 and 135,000 respectively." On the eve of Ukraine's referendum, the leaders of a Romanian cultural society in Chernivtsi announced that they expected that some Romanians in the region would respond to the Romanian parliament's resolution on the border issue by boycotting the poll.¹⁷

As the referendum approached, Kravchuk, the Ukrainian parliament and the national democratic forces did their best to promote unity and to reassure the national minorities that not only would their rights be fully respected in the new Ukraine but also that they

¹⁵ TASS, 28 and 29 November, and Radio Kyiv, 29 November, 1991.

¹⁶ On Ukrainian-Moldovan relations, see the author's 'Ukraine and Moldova: The View from Kiev', *RFE/RL Research Report*, vol. 1, no. 18 (1 May 1992), pp. 39-45, and 'Moldovan Conflict Creates new Dilemmas for Ukraine', *REF/RL Research Report*, vol. 1, no. 20 (15 May 1992), pp. 1-8.

¹⁷ AFP, 30 November 1991.

could consider it as their home. The liberal citizenship law certainly helped in this respect. Furthermore, the fact that a Russian, Fokin, continued to head the government, that the new minister of defence was also a Russian, and that another Russian, Hrynov, was running for president, was an encouraging sign for Ukraine's massive Russian population and showed that far from being squeezed out, Russians were helping to build the new Ukrainian state.

Ukraine's second largest minority, the Jews, many of whom had emigrated from Ukraine as from other parts of the USSR in recent years and were continuing to do so, could also witness reassuring changes for the better. For a week beginning on 29 September, the Ukrainian government officially sponsored the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Nazi massacre of Jews and others at Babyi Yar on the outskirts of Kyiv. Kyiv's main streets were hung with commemorative banners and a special exhibition was mounted along the Khreshchatyk. Kravchuk himself participated in a memorial meeting and delivered a historic statement designed to open a brighter chapter in the often troubled history of relations between the Ukrainian and Jewish peoples by accepting a share of the guilt and offering a formal apology. He declared:

Babyi Yar was a genocide and not only the Nazis are to blame for it. Part of the blame lies with those who didn't prevent them from carrying it out, so part is ours and we think it only natural to apologize before the Jewish people. . . . We do not accept the ideological concept of the former [Communist] Ukraine that neglected human rights, hid the truth about Babyi Yar, hid the truth of the number killed there and the fact that most were of Jewish origin.

Anti-Semitism, he continued, would not be tolerated in the new Ukraine, stressing: 'We are building statehood for all nationalities living on this land.'¹⁸

The same democratic spirit was reflected in a Declaration of the Rights of the Nationalities of Ukraine adopted by the parliament at the beginning of November which affirmed, among other things, that 'discrimination on ethnic grounds is proscribed and punishable by the law', that the Ukrainian state guaranteed the national minorities the right to develop their cultural life freely, and that it

See the reports by Chrystia Freeland in the *Financial Times* and Susan Viets in *The Independent*, 7 October 1991.

assumed 'responsibility for creating the proper conditions for the development' of their national languages and cultures.¹⁹ Furthermore, on 17-18 November the Ukrainian authorities and Rukh jointly convened a Congress of National Minorities in Odesa. Not surprisingly, the Congress issued an appeal calling on the republic's national minorities to support Ukrainian independence and contribute to building the new state.²⁰

Closer still to the referendum, the authorities also managed to convene in Kyiv an unprecedented conference of all the republic's main religious denominations, sixteen of which were represented, most by their leaders. Kravchuk also participated. The gathering on 18—19 November provided a poignant reminder that although the Orthodox and Catholic churches predominated in Ukraine, there were also Protestant, Jewish and Muslim believers. In view of the persistence of religious discord and rivalry in the republic, the Congress served as a useful attempt to promote conciliation and reduce tensions. It also gave the participants an opportunity to press the government to improve shortcomings in the legislation pertaining to religious believers and to return religious buildings still not restored to them.

A prominent role was played by Metropolitan Filaret, who was close to Kravchuk, and who by now had become a supporter of Ukrainian independence. In fact, he was heading efforts by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, or at least a part of its hierarchy, to obtain autocephaly, or canonical independence, from the Moscow Patriarchate. This 'evolution' had of course brought the Ukrainian Orthodox Church closer to the position of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church and the possibility of a merger of the two Orthodox churches was already being talked about.²¹

However important the efforts to win over Ukraine's national minorities were — the main churches, perhaps with the exception of some believers within the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, were ardent supporters of independence and did not need really need persuading — probably the crucial factors determining the voting in the referendum as far as the critical mass of Russians and Russified Ukrainians in the south and east were concerned were socio-

¹⁹ *Pravovi dzherela Ukrainy*, no. 1, 1994, pp. 8-9.

²¹ Radio Kyiv, 18 and 19 November 1991.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 20 November 1991.

economic considerations. But these, too, were working in favour of independence. After years of watching Moscow make a mess of economic reform and feeling the consequences of the economic crisis and disorder, and having witnessed the decline and continuing dissolution of the Soviet Union, there seemed to be very little reason to place hopes on a reconstituted Union and a revitalized centre. Instead, the belief that social and economic prospects would be better in an independent Ukraine, promoted by Ukrainian national democrats and now Ukraine's government, too, had taken hold. External experts had also reinforced this view by giving a high rating to Ukraine's economic potential."

In reality, serious problems were looming on the horizon for the Ukrainian economy. Ukrainian-Russian relations were being strained by the increasingly frequent non-fulfilment of supply agreements (oil, gas and timber from Russia to Ukraine and grain, sugar, heavy machinery and construction materials going the other way) and the production stoppages and recriminations which this brought. Furthermore, the Russian government was planning to liberalize prices and to raise the price of its fuel exports and this threatened to hit the Ukrainian economy very hard.

Fokin's government had also decided, as an interim step, to introduce a system of multi-use coupons for purchasing food and consumer goods. The decision to use a surrogate currency alongside the rouble was precipitated by the growing shortage of roubles in Ukraine and the need to protect the Ukrainian market, especially in food supplies. Russia controlled the rouble printing presses and the distribution of cash. Having a higher rate of inflation, and itself facing a shortage of roubles, Russia had been raising salaries, while in Ukraine, where prices and wages were relatively more stable, the government had serious difficulties paying even the existing wages.²³

The Ukrainian parliament had recently voted to close down the Chornobyl nuclear power plant in 1993. It was unclear at this stage, though, how Ukraine, already so dependent on Russia for fuel, would manage to secure alternative sources of energy. And of

For example, a special report published by the Deutsche Bank in October 1990 had given Ukraine the highest rating of all the Soviet republics. See Jurgen Corbet and Andreas Gummich, *The Soviet Union at the Crossroads: Facts and Figures on the Soviet Republics*, Frankfurt, 1990.

Chrystia Freeland, 'Economists Plot Go-It-Alone Strategy for the Ukraine', *Financial Times*, 27 September 1991.

course, the intractable problems of the Donbas and the consequences of the Chornobyl disaster remained and continued to drain resources.

Towards an orderly separation from the Union

Despite the renewed taction between Kyiv and Moscow, Kravchuk and other Ukrainian leaders seem to have gone out of their way to prevent an open rift with Russia on the eve of the referendum. Indeed, it was to the credit of the Ukrainian politicians running for the presidency that they did not seek to fan anti-Russian sentiment as a means of increasing their votes. Kravchuk himself was to stress throughout the preparations for the referendum and the presidential elections how important it was for both Ukraine and Russia to remain on good terms with one another. Choosing not to capitalize on the disclosures in the Moscow press about Yeltsin's alleged discussion of the possibility of a nuclear strike against Ukraine, he dismissed the reports as 'a crude provocation' designed to set the Ukrainians and Russians against one another.

Fortunately for Ukraine, and the other non-Russian former Union republics, since Yeltsin had emerged the victor in Moscow after the failed coup attempt, a group of young and radical anti-Communist figures had become his closet advisers and were gradually to fill key positions in his 'administration'. They included the philosopher Gennadii Burbulis (whose father was Lithuanian and mother Russian), the economist Yegor Gaidar, Sergei Shakhrai and Russia's new foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev. These Russian 'Young Turks' also constituted what could be termed an 'anti-imperial' party. Opposed to the old centre, they wanted to strengthen the statehood of a democratic Russia, to move in the direction of a market economy and for Russia to assume the rights and obligations of the USSR. They also believed that Russia's relations with the other Union republics should be altered accordingly, that is, that Russia should stop subsidizing them and instead begin conducting business with them on the basis of bilateral agreements.²⁴

²⁴ See Alexander Rahr, 'Russia's "Young Turks" in Power', *Report on the USSR*, vol. 3, no. 47 (22 November 1991), pp. 20-3.

Consequently, the lines of communication between Kyiv and Moscow remained open and towards the end of October the two sides agreed to try and work out their problems in a new round of talks, this time in Moscow. First the foreign and defence ministers of both countries met and cleared the air by reaching agreement on a broad range of issues of mutual concern and formalizing the bilateral accord which had been announced in the Ukrainian-Russian communique of 29 August. Furthermore, in a wide-ranging protocol signed on 30 October by Zlenko and his Russian counterpart, Kozyrev, the two sides reiterated that the nuclear weapons on Ukrainian territory should be controlled and dismantled by a central authority accountable to all republics.²⁵ The following day, however, Zlenko issued a statement emphasizing once again that Ukraine wanted the nuclear weapons on its territory to be destroyed, not just moved, and that it also wanted 'full guarantees' that the weapons would not be used before they were destroyed.

Over the next few days further progress in the bilateral talks was made, enabling Morozov to announce on 4 November that Russia had agreed to the creation of Ukrainian armed forces. Two days later, Presidents Kravchuk and Yeltsin signed a communique which, while referring to the need for a collective security system with unified strategic forces, acknowledged the right of Ukraine and Russia to set up their own armed forces and once again recognized the existing borders of the two states. Rounding off the series of accords, that same day the two neighbours also signed a trade and economic cooperation agreement for 1992 which seemed to provide Ukraine with a breathing space.²⁶

There was almost a hitch, though. While the bilateral talks were under way in Moscow, the Ukrainian parliament reacted with concern to news from Moscow that Kravchuk and Fokin had apparently agreed, without first consulting it, to sign the treaty establishing an economic community which eight republics and Gorbachev had concluded the previous month. It also led some deputies to accuse Yeltsin's government of having begun to use economic and trade levers to 'blackmail' Ukraine.

Fokin responded by confirming that since the economic treaty

²⁵ Ukrinform-TASS and Radio Rossii, 30 October 1991.

^{**} Radio Kyiv, 6 November 1991, and Chapter 3 in Clark, *An Empire's New Clothes*.

had been signed, Ukraine had indeed begun experiencing 'complications' as regards the honouring of existing supply contracts between Ukrainian enterprises and their partners in the republics which had formed the new economic community. Ukraine, he argued, could not afford to divorce itself completely from the new arrangement for inter-republican economic cooperation and it was wiser to try and work out compromises. If, for instance, Russia started charging world prices for fuel, then either Ukraine would find itself in the red *vis-a-vis* its northern neighbour or would have to increase substantially the amount of grain, meat, sugar and other products it was delivering to it in exchange. The prime minister was able, however, to reassure the deputies that the treaty had already been amended to take into account some of Ukraine's reservations and that Kyiv would continue to insist on a large number of additional changes on 'matters of principle'. On behalf of the Ukrainian government he proposed, therefore, that for the time being Ukraine initial the treaty subject to its ratification by the parliament. His arguments persuaded the majority of the deputies and on 6 November he initialled the treaty.²⁷

But the distrust of the residual centre was so strong and the fear of Ukraine being dragged into a new Union so great that a week later Fokin was reduced to threatening to resign if the deputies blocked Ukraine's adherence to the economic treaty. He was also very forthright in his depiction of what awaited Ukraine if it were to sever its ties with the republics which had signed the agreement: unemployment in the republic would rapidly soar and within months reach about 3 million, and production would fall by 25%. He also reminded the deputies that Ukraine had a negative balance of trade, and that if Russia and other republics moved closer to using world prices in trade the republic would sink into debt.²⁸

With confidence growing in Ukrainian political circles that the referendum would produce a decisive endorsement of independence — Kravchuk even expressed the hope that the percentage of voters supporting independence would surpass 85% — Ukrainian leaders continued to work towards an orderly-withdrawal from the old Union. The message which was to come across very clearly from official Kyiv during the last month before the referendum was that

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 13 November 1991.

Ukraine had no interest in being part of any political Union but was seeking the most appropriate terms for itself to remain connected to the other republics in some form of loose partnership for economic and other forms of mutually beneficial cooperation. At the same time, Ukraine's Foreign Ministry was actively continuing the diplomatic groundwork for Ukraine's formal international recognition.

When on 14 November Gorbachev called a meeting in Novo Ogarevo to finalize the latest variant of the proposed Union treaty, Ukraine boycotted it. The representatives of seven states, including Russia, which did participate ended up having a heated debate with Gorbachev about whether the new association of states would still be a single state, and the latter threatened to resign if it was not. Eventually, they agreed in principle on a compromise — that the new 'Union of Sovereign States' would be a 'confederative democratic state' (author's emphasis).²⁹ Kravchuk publicly dismissed the meeting, declaring that the Novo Ogarevo process had no future and that it would be better to try and follow the example of the European Community.³⁰ The following month, he would reveal that around this time he began proposing to Yeltsin and to the chairman of the Belarusian parliament, Stanislau Shushkevich, that they should meet and try and find their own solution for dispensing with the Union and building cooperation among themselves on a new basis.

Some kind of transitional arrangement was clearly essential. On 22 November, Kravchuk pointed out that the Russian government's decision to liberalize prices, 'taken without agreeing it first with the other former Union republics', was 'rather convincing evidence that the treaty on economic cooperation' had been stillborn.³² Furthermore, on the following day, Fokin complained that Ukraine was being pressured by Russia and the G7 states to agree to pay part of the Soviet foreign debt without knowing how

" See Ann Sheehy, 'The Union Treaty: A Further Setback', *Report on the USSR*, vol. 3, no. 49 (6 December 1991), pp. 1-4.

Soviet television, 15 November 1991.

See Kravchuk's interview in *Paris Match*, 26 December 1991, p. 58, and with Kichigin, *Kievskic novosti*, 23 April 1994.

See Kravchuk's speech in *Demokratychna Ukraina* [the new name of Radyanska Ukraina], 26 November 1991.

large the debt was and how it and Soviet assets would be divided up among the former Union republics.³³

The Ukrainian leader also stayed away from the next meeting at Novo Ogarevo on 25 November. At the beginning of it, Gorbachev, evidently hoping to seal the agreement there and then, announced to the press that the participants had convened to initial the document. But his attempt to force the issue was resisted by the leaders of the republics, who were still not happy with the terms of the arrangement and, as Yeltsin later acknowledged, sceptical about the value of the whole exercise because of Ukraine's absence. Yeltsin has provided a description of the fiasco and its significance:

When Gorbachev ultimately tried to insist on his own formulation and we unanimously rejected it, he lost his patience, jumped up from the table, and ran out of the meeting room . . . we suddenly realized that it was over. We were meeting here for the last time. The Novo Ogarevo saga had drawn to a close. There was no more progress in that direction and never would be. We would have to seek and conceive of something else.

The official sanitized version stated that the draft treaty was being returned for further consideration by the parliaments of the republics.³⁴

This time, Kravchuk was even more scathing about Gorbachev's obsession with preserving the Union when even those republican leaders who had supported the idea had now also accepted that it was time for something else. Commenting on Gorbachev's readiness to describe the new Union as confederative as long as it remained a union state — for instance, the final draft of the Union treaty retained the concept of a popularly elected president — the Ukrainian leader told *Izvestia*:

Yes, they are now saying: let's create a confederation. And then they add: but we are for a single state. What is this? A confederation and a single state are incompatible and mutually exclusive. When will we stop deceiving our own people? Half-

³³ Radio Kyiv, 24 November 1991.

³⁴ Yeltsin, *Tlic Struggle for Russia*, pp. 110-11. See also the accounts of the last two meetings in Novo Ogarevo in Jack F. Matlock, Jr., *Autopsy on an Empire: The American Ambassador's Account of the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, New York, 1995, pp. 624-9.

hearted measures, vagueness, matters left unsaid, endless attempts to evade the tough questions—how long can this go on? I don't want to participate in this deception.³⁵

In fact it did not continue for much longer. But before the result of the Ukrainian referendum produced what Yeltsin described as 'the final blow to Gorbachev's protracted attempt to save the crumbling Soviet Union',³⁶ there was one other noteworthy last-minute development. On the eve of the referendum, while still pressing the Ukrainian leadership on the issue of nuclear weapons, the Bush administration shifted its position and announced that it would recognize Ukraine's independence if the voters endorsed it. This was encouraging news for official Kyiv which had already received assurances from Canada and Hungary that recognition would be forthcoming if the referendum went as expected. But for Gorbachev it was tantamount to a stab in the back and he virtually accused Washington of interfering in the USSR's 'internal affairs'.³⁷ Moreover, the Soviet media reported that in a telephone conversation with President Bush on 30 November Gorbachev sought to impress on the White House that he would not interpret a vote for Ukrainian independence as a vote for secession from the Union. Interestingly, that same day, Yeltsin also declared on Soviet television that he could not imagine a Union without Ukraine. He added: 'I have always said that I am for a Union.'³⁸

As for Kravchuk, clearly expecting a huge triumph in the referendum and victory in the presidential election, on 22 November he delivered a programmatic speech at a meeting of the Ukrainian parliament to mark the 125th anniversary of the birth of Hrushevsky. Hailing him as Ukraine's first president and without so much as mentioning the Soviet state, the chairman of the Ukrainian parliament stressed that the leaders of the new independent Ukraine saw themselves as continuing the unfinished work of Hrushevsky and his generation.³⁹

Izvestiya, 26 November.

³⁵ Yeltsin, *The Struggle for Russia*, p. 111.

³⁶ Gerald Nadler, 'Ukraine Poised to Bolt from the USSR', *The Washington Times*, 1 December 1991.

³⁷ TASS, 1 December 1991.

³⁹ *Demokratychna Ukraina*, 26 December 1991.

Ukraine confirms its historic choice

When it came to the crucial vote, the result astonished even the greatest optimists. No fewer than 84.1% of the eligible voters, or almost 32 million people, cast their ballot and Ukrainians and non-Ukrainians alike throughout the republic came out overwhelmingly for independence. An astounding 90.3% of the voters gave their endorsement to the Declaration of Independence which the Ukrainian parliament had adopted three months earlier. The gamble had paid off handsomely.

According to the final results published on 5 December, the vote for independence in the key industrialized but Russified regions was: in Donetsk, 83.9%; in Dnipropetrovsk, 90.3%; in Zaporizhzhya, 90.6%; in Kharkiv, 86.3%; and in Luhansk, 83.3%. In the southern regions, support for independence was also very high: in Odesa, 85.3%; in Mykolaiv, 89.4%; and in Kherson, 90.1%. Even in Crimea, 54.1% of the voters backed independence. In the western and central regions and in the capital support for independence was 90% and upwards.⁴¹ Significantly, two-thirds of the Soviet military personnel stationed in Ukraine apparently cast their ballot for independence.⁴¹ Remarkably then, as *The Times* of 3 December put it, Ukraine's referendum turned out to be 'a model of peaceful change'.

In the presidential contest, Kravchuk won convincingly, obtaining an impressive 61.5% of the votes. Chornovil came second with a respectable 23.2% of the votes, and Lukyanenko was third with 4.4%. What was the secret of Kravchuk's success? It was not simply that he had had the weighty support of the former 'partocracy's' apparatus behind him. As Drach conceded, Kravchuk was seen by 'the silent majority of Ukrainians' as 'a stabilizing factor'; in the opinion of another Rukh leader, Mykhailo Horyn, Kravchuk 'appeared to be a centrist' and thereby appealed to the cautious streak in voters.⁴² But perhaps the most important factor was that by now

Ibid., 5 December 1991. In the local referendums, 78% of the voters in the Transcarpathian region, 89.3% in the Chernivtsi region, and 81.4% in the Deregovo district came out in support of greater local autonomy. In several villages in the Chernivtsi region, Romanians were reported to have boycotted the referendum. *Demoklyclina Ukraina*, 4 and 5 December 1991.

⁴¹ Radio Kyiv, 6 December 1991.

⁴² AP, 3 December 1991.

Kravchuk, the former Party ideologist turned champion of Ukraine's sovereignty, had become identified with the building of Ukrainian statehood and the quest for independence.

An elated Kravchuk told journalists: 'A new Ukraine has been born. A great historical event has occurred which will not only change the history of Ukraine, but the history of the world.'⁴³ What he meant was poignantly summed up in one sentence by the *Independent*: 'The birth of Ukraine marks the death of the Soviet Union.'⁴⁴ There was still one figure, though, who refused to recognize this — Gorbachev. Despite the choice which Ukraine's population had made, he persisted with his efforts to promote a new Union and to express the hope that Ukraine could still be persuaded to join it. In fact, in his congratulatory message to Kravchuk, he expressed his hope for 'close cooperation and mutual understanding in common efforts to fulfil democratic changes and form the Union of Sovereign States'.⁴⁵

Kravchuk, however, made it abundantly clear that after the referendum's resounding verdict he was no longer interested even in a confederation. What he was after was some kind of arrangement with Russia and Belarus for the purposes of cushioning the Ukrainian economy during this complex transitional period. On 2 December he told journalists that he would be shortly going to Minsk to discuss the creation of 'a new type of economic community'.

Once the provisional results of the referendum had been announced, on 2 December Poland became the first state to accord formal recognition of Ukraine's independence. It was followed by Hungary, and Canada was the first Western country to confirm that it would shortly extend diplomatic recognition. Both Russia and the United States also signalled that they were ready to recognize Ukraine's independence, but, implicitly in the case of the Russian Federation, and explicitly in the case of the United States, on condition that independent Ukraine abided by nuclear disarmament pacts and respected human rights. In fact, the White House imme-

John-Thor Dahlburg, 'More than 90 Percent of Ukrainians Vote for Independence', *Los Angeles Times*, 3 December 1991.

The Independent, 2 December 1991.

⁴⁵ TASS, 3 and 4 December 1991.

⁴⁶ Renter, 2 December 1991.

diately dispatched a senior emissary to Kyiv to discuss these issues and to prepare the ground for a visit to Kyiv by the US Secretary of State James Baker.⁴⁷

In a statement by President Yeltsin read out on Russian television on 3 December, Russia recognized the 'independence of Ukraine in accordance with the democratic self-determination of its people'. It also declared its readiness to develop bilateral relations on the basis of the principles upheld in the Russo-Ukrainian treaty of November 1990 and the communique of November 1991. The statement added that the example of Ukrainian-Russian inter-state relations 'could and should' serve as a model for bilateral relations for 'the republics of the old Union' and open the way for the formation of a 'commonwealth of sovereign states'.⁴⁸

But as the former US Ambassador in Moscow, Jack F. Matlock, Jr., has pointed out, 'the Russian action was more than just generosity forced by necessity'. Since August, Ukraine's surge towards independence had created quite a dilemma for Yeltsin's government. Kozyrev had told the ambassador shortly after the Ukrainian parliament had declared the republic's independence that 'This is a big political issue at home', and had asked 'What can we do?' On being advised to be 'gracious' and not to treat Ukraine 'like Gorbachev did the Baltics' because Russia and Ukraine needed to cooperate in many areas, Kozyrev had agreed. According to Matlock, Kozyrev had 'added, grimacing as if in pain, "But don't think it isn't hard - or that a lot of people won't be upset."' What followed, as Matlock noted, also

fitted the game plan Yeltsin seems to have been following since at least the middle of November: to use Ukraine's refusal to enter the union as an excuse for breaking his long-standing promise not to be the initiator of the union's collapse. Now, he could argue that Ukraine, not Russia, had brought the Soviet Union to an end.⁴⁹

On 5 December, at a special ceremonial meeting for Kravchuk's inauguration as president, the Ukrainian parliament formerly renounced the Union Treaty of 1922 and adopted a statement to

⁴⁷ See Nahaylo, 'The Shaping of Ukrainian Attitudes', p. 30.

⁴⁸ TASS, 3 December 1991.

Matlock, *Autopsy on an Empire*, p. 633.

this effect addressed to 'the parliaments and peoples of the world'. It called on the international community to show understanding for the desire 'of one of Europe's most populous peoples to revive its statehood, which had been destroyed not just once' and to support Ukraine's commitment to building an 'independent, democratic' state. The deputy chairman of the parliament, Plyushch, who was elected to take over from Kravchuk as its speaker, aptly summed up the historic significance of the occasion: 'A European state has appeared on the map of the world, and its name is Ukraine.'

Significantly, one of the guests at the ceremonial meeting was Russia's recently appointed representative in Ukraine, Leonid Smolyakov. He read out a message from President Yeltsin congratulating Kravchuk on his election and 'confirming' that now that 'a new level' of bilateral relations had begun 'from 1 December', Russia would be 'firmly committed to the dynamic development of all-round relations' between the two states 'on the basis of agreed upon principles'.

This official statement was reassuring for the newly independent state, for not only Gorbachev, but quite a few Russian leaders who were opposed to the break-up of the Soviet Union, were expressing a very different view. Sobchak, for instance, was warning of forced Ukrainization of Ukraine's Russian population and conjuring up apocalyptic images of a nuclear clash between Russia and Ukraine, provoked by a territorial dispute. Referring to another troubled relationship which had caused international concern, he suggested that Ukraine and Russia were like Serbia and Croatia, except that they were armed with nuclear weapons.⁵⁰ Moreover, precisely at this time, there was renewed talk in Moscow about the danger of a military-backed coup, with suspicion focusing increasingly on Yeltsin's disgruntled deputy, Rutskoi.⁵¹

In his inaugural speech, President Kravchuk described the outcome of the referendum as a 'great historic victory', declaring that Ukraine had finally 'risen from its knees'. After the long years of 'oppression and destruction', during which the historical memory and language of the Ukrainian people had been attacked and its 'thousand-year-old experience of state-building distorted', the na-

See the interview with Sobchak in *Figaro*, 4 December 1991.

⁵¹ *The Washington Post*, 6 December 1991.

tion had 'democratically and unambivalently expressed its will' and chosen independent statehood.

The president reiterated Ukraine's commitment to democracy, 'deep and consistent economic reform', peace and nuclear disarmament. While continuing its broad-ranging state-building work at home, he declared, Ukraine would pursue an active foreign policy aimed at securing the country's direct participation in European structures, developing wide-ranging bilateral relations, especially with European and North American states, and 'maintaining good relations with all the republics of the former Union, especially Russia'.⁵²

Later on, speaking to reporters, Kravchuk stated that, after living 'all this time in a giant totalitarian imperial state', Ukraine had finally freed itself, and reiterated that Ukraine would not join Gorbachev's proposed new Union treaty. He acknowledged, however, that it was not possible, nor indeed desirable, to rupture all the ties which had developed within the old Union. Answering questions about his forthcoming meeting in Minsk on 7 December with Yeltsin and Shushkevich, the Ukrainian president informed journalists that economic cooperation would be the chief topic, but that the three leaders also intended to have a 'brainstorming' session on political issues and that he was going prepared with 'concrete proposals'.⁵³

Ukraine and the creation of the CIS

An official visit to Belarus by Yeltsin provided the opportunity which Kravchuk had sought for a meeting outside Moscow of the leaders of the three Slavic republics. In fact, Shushkevich had phoned Kravchuk and invited him for joint consultations.⁵⁴ But the three leaders had different agendas, for Yeltsin and Shushkevich still preferred to salvage the idea of a renewed Union, though they realized that this depended on Ukraine's being won over. Before leaving for Belarus, Yeltsin met with Gorbachev

⁵² *Demokratychna Ukraina*, 1 December 1991.

⁵³ Radio Kyiv, 5 December 1991.

⁵⁴ On the meeting of the three Slavic leaders in Belarus and the creation of the CIS, see Kravchuk's account in his interview with Kichigin in *Kievskie vedomosti*, 23 and 27 April 1994; with Chemerys in *Przydant*, pp. 265-75; and for Russian television, shown on 11 February 1992. For Yeltsin's account, see his *The Struggle for Russia*, pp. 111-16.

and, at the latter's request, apparently agreed to try one more time to persuade Ukraine to sign the new Union treaty. On his arrival in Minsk, the Russian president declared before television cameras that if Ukraine agreed to participate, a Union treaty could still be signed, but 'if Ukraine wishes to be a fully independent state, that is, if it does not sign this political treaty, then we will have to look for new variants'.⁵⁵ Indirect pressure on Ukraine was also applied by the old centre: it took the form of an announcement by Gorbachev's press spokesman that on 9 December the Soviet leader expected to meet with Kravchuk, Yeltsin and Nazarbaev in Moscow.⁵⁶

Kravchuk was later to acknowledge that he went to Minsk not knowing how the meeting would go but expecting that the issue of the Union treaty would be brought up. On his arrival he discovered that the venue for the consultations had been changed and that they would be held in a government hunting lodge at the Belovezhkaya Pushcha (White Tower Forest) near Brest. The secrecy surrounding the meeting and the fact that Yeltsin had brought senior figures from his government added to the drama. His team consisted of the new first deputy head of the Russian government, Burbulis, the deputy head, Gaidar, State Councillor Shakhrai and the president's aide, Viktor Uyushin; Belarus was represented by Shushkevich and the Belarusian prime minister, Vyacheslau Kebich, and Kravchuk was accompanied by Fokin.

The meeting began with Yeltsin posing the crucial question on behalf of Gorbachev: on what terms would Ukraine agree to sign the Union treaty? Kravchuk's response was quite categorical: the referendum had irrevocably changed the situation and Ukraine would not join any new Union. According to his account, he then described in considerable detail the results of the voting in the various regions, prompting Yeltsin to ask: 'What, even the Donbas voted "yes"?'⁵⁷ With Kravchuk having reiterated his country's choice, Yeltsin acknowledged that without Ukraine the Union treaty was a non-starter. The discussion shifted, therefore, to finding an alternative arrangement which would dispense with the old

¹ See Roman Solchanyk, 'Kravchuk Defines Ukrainian-CIS Relations', *RFE/RL Research Report*, vol. 1, no. 11 (13 March 1991), p. 7.

⁵⁶ Reuter, 5 December 1991.

⁵⁷ See Kravchuk's interview with Kichigin, *Kievskie vedomosti*, 23 April 1994.

Union and its centre and accommodate all three states. Kravchuk presented his ideas on a loose association modelled on the European Community, while for the Russian side, Burbulis, whom the Ukrainian leader later described as having been the 'ideologue' in Yeltsin's team, also made some proposals. It turned out that the positions of the two delegations were not that far apart, and with the Belarusian leaders going along with their Russian and Ukrainian guests in agreeing that the idea of the Union was now well and truly obsolete, within a few hours a compromise was worked out.

The leaders of the three Slavic states agreed to form a loose non-state association open to all former Soviet republics, as well as other states, which they called the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Working through the night, they produced three documents, which they signed in Minsk on 8 December: a declaration announcing the formation of the new entity, an agreement outlining the principles on which the CIS would be based, and a statement on the coordination of economic policy. The agreement on the creation of the CIS declared that 'the USSR, as subject of international law and geographical reality, is ceasing to exist'. It also contained provisions, presented more as statements of intention and subject to further negotiations and agreements, addressing the most serious issues resulting from the break-up of the Soviet empire, including: respect for human rights and protection of national minorities, recognition of the territorial integrity and inviolability of the borders of member states, the preservation 'under joint command [of] a common military-strategic space, including single control over nuclear weapons' and cooperation in the economic, cultural, environmental, foreign and migration policy spheres.⁵⁸

Having announced their momentous decision to declare the USSR defunct, the three leaders braced themselves for the unpredictable reaction from Gorbachev, from their own parliaments and from the leaders of the other republics. They had already informed the American and Soviet presidents by telephone from Belovezhkaya Pushcha and Yeltsin was delegated to brief the incensed Gorbachev in more detail on his return to Moscow. Rather late in their meeting, Yeltsin, Kravchuk and Shushkevich had decided to invite Nazarbaev to join them but had failed to reach

⁵⁸ For an English translation of the text of the agreement, see *RFE/RL Research Report*, vol. 1, no. 2 (10 January 1992) pp. 4-5.

him. He was now in Moscow and angered by what he saw as a snub. The leaders of the Central Asian republics also suspected that they were being abandoned by the architects of a new Slavonic union.

Kravchuk decided not to go on to Moscow and flew home to face a public and parliament anxious to hear from their president what exactly he had committed his newly independent state to. Although publicly he ruled out the possibility of Gorbachev resorting to force to hold the Union together, in a later account he was to admit that, because it was uncertain how the centre would respond to the Belovezhsky agreement, special security precautions were taken just in case: details of his return flight were kept secret and his home outside of Kyiv was placed under guard by a detachment of *spetsnaz*-elite special forces.⁵⁹

On 9 December, the Ukrainian president held a press conference in Kyiv in which he was at pains to point out that the new commonwealth had nothing in common with the old Union and that Ukraine was not sacrificing any of its sovereignty by joining it. The CIS, he explained, would have no centre, only coordinating mechanisms. At a time when problems connected with the dissolution of the USSR were becoming 'exceptionally complicated' and the old Union centre was trying to 'return to the old structures', the new arrangement offered prospects for cooperation on a democratic basis between interested independent states. He also stressed that the CIS stemmed from Ukraine's 'decisive' refusal to join a new Union, and left no doubt that Russia and Belarus would have preferred a closer association.⁶⁰

On the following day, Kravchuk addressed the Ukrainian parliament. In addition to the explanations which he had offered to the press, he stressed that the CIS represented an attempt by the three Slavic states both to 'dot the i's' as far as the attempts to restore the old Union were concerned, and, at the same time, to 'halt the spontaneous disintegration' of what was left of the USSR. As if appealing to the crypto-Communist majority, the Ukrainian leader argued that the break-up of the Soviet Union had in fact begun when *perestroika* had been launched and 'the authors' of this collapse were known well enough. He blamed Gorbachev for the destruction of the Soviet economy, inter-ethnic bloodshed and the growing

⁵⁹ Kravchuk's interview with Kichigin, *Kivskic vedomosti*, 27 April 1991.

⁶⁰ Radio Kyiv, 9 December 1991.

number of refugees. The old centre which had caused the problems had proved incapable of dealing with them and was still complicating matters by trying to renew the old methods. The disintegration of the former Soviet Union was not only resulting in economic dislocation, but also 'reactionary forces' were threatening to exploit problems in order to foment confrontation between peoples. The agreement about the formation of the CIS had therefore been aimed at 'stabilizing the situation'.⁶¹

Although Kravchuk managed to win over the majority of the deputies, the parliament ratified the agreement creating the CIS with quite a few provisos. These included a reaffirmation of Ukraine's independence, emphatic opposition to the 'transformation' of the CIS into 'a state formation with its own organs of power and administration', and even that the word commonwealth be written with a small c and not a capital.⁶²

From the very outset, then, the CIS proved to be an uneasy compromise and it was evident almost immediately that Ukraine and Russia had very different views about its significance and prospects. For Ukraine it represented a 'civilized form of divorce' from the old imperial set-up, an interim arrangement providing an orderly framework and procedures for the liquidation of the Soviet Union and for managing some of the complex problems left over in the economic and military spheres. The pride and sensitivities connected with Ukraine's newly achieved independence were undoubtedly significant in influencing perceptions of the CIS. In an interview given to the *Financial Times* on 16 December 1991, Kravchuk put it as follows:

The empire which endured for 337 years [from the Pereyaslav treaty] no longer exists, and Ukraine is the author of its destruction . . . For me this is a source of great personal pride . . . Right now we must monitor the situation very carefully so that no one tries to stand above anyone else . . . If there is any effort to do this, then the commonwealth will fall apart because Ukraine will never agree to be subordinated.⁶³

For Russia, however, the CIS represented at best a means of

⁶¹ *Robotnycha hazcta*, 13 December 1991.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 25 December 1991.

^M Chrystia Freeland, 'Chess Player Moves to a Digger Board', *Financial Times*, 17 December 1991.

discarding Gorbachev and the old Union centre and, while continuing to assert Russia's authority, the establishment of a new basis for integration and movement towards a more close-knit organization. As Yeltsin put it:

The Belovezhsky agreement, as it seemed to me then, was needed more than anything to reinforce the centripetal tendency in the disintegrating Union and to stimulate the treaty process [sic] . . . I want to emphasize once again: at that moment, the Commonwealth of Independent States . . . was the only possible preservation of an integrated geographical region . . . I was convinced that Russia needed to get rid of its imperial mission; nevertheless, Russia needed a stronger, harder policy, even forceful at some stage, in order not to lose its significance and authority altogether and to institute reforms.¹⁴

For many Russians, however, the Belovezhsky agreement creating the CIS and thereby shedding the remnants of the Soviet empire was tantamount to an act of betrayal. As Ambassador Matlock noted, 'not only the unreconstructed imperialists' and 'former Communist *apparatchiks*' opposed the agreement, but also 'respected democrats', such as Sobchak, Popov, 'Nikolai Travkin of the Democratic Party, and most of the leaders of the Movement for Democratic Reforms'.⁶⁵ Significantly, within a few days of the ratification of the CIS agreement by the Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian parliaments, even Burbulis was publicly expressing his doubts about whether the creation of a commonwealth had been the right decision and suggesting that the arrangement was a 'liberal illusion that can lead either to a federation or to war'.⁶⁶

The agreement on the establishment of the CIS notwithstanding, the potential for disagreement and confrontation between Ukraine and Russia remained. It was exposed again in the second half of December as Russia and Ukraine asserted their claims to the assets of the former Union and Russia unilaterally took over what the other former Union republics considered to be their joint property, ranging from Soviet embassies abroad to Soviet central television. While challenging Russia's claim to be the sole legal successor of the USSR, Ukraine also moved ahead with the creation of its armed

⁶⁵ Yeltsin, *The Struggle for Russia*, p. 114.

Matlock, *Autopsy on an Empire*, p. 639.

Radio Moscow, 12 December 1991.

forces and on 13 December Kravchuk declared himself their Commander-in-Chief.

It was at this point that a new serious source of friction emerged which was to strain bilateral relations for years to come — the issue of the ownership of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet. Having a long coastline, Ukraine considered that it required a navy to protect its shores and its shipping. It sought to apply the same principles in creating a navy on the basis of the 380-vessel Black Sea Fleet based in Crimea as it was doing in creating an army and air force from Soviet military units stationed on its territory. In light of Ukraine's considerable contribution to the Soviet navy, in terms of revenue, shipbuilding and sailors, official Kyiv considered its claim to what after all was the smallest of the USSR's four fleets, and accounted for only about 10% of the entire Soviet navy, reasonable enough. For Russia, apart from its military significance, the Black Sea Fleet was a matter of tradition and prestige and, moreover, was identified with the future of Sevastopol and the Crimean peninsula generally.

At the subsequent CIS meetings in Alma-Ata on 21 December, at which eight other former Union republics joined the new association (Georgia stayed out), and in Minsk on 30 December, the strains between Ukraine and Russia became more obvious. Ukraine continued to oppose any moves which would make the commonwealth resemble a state and vetoed the idea of a charter for the CIS, of a CIS citizenship and of joint guarding of the commonwealth's external borders. It also successfully defended the right of members to have their own conventional forces.⁶⁷ Thus, during the very first weeks of the realization and recognition of Ukraine's independence, the stage for the protracted tug-of-war between Ukraine and Russia, which was to be a hallmark of the CIS, was set.

The existence of the new CIS framework nevertheless facilitated the conclusion of important compromise agreements dealing with the future of the Soviet military and its nuclear arsenal. In the second half of December, after a visit to Kyiv by US Secretary of State James Baker and negotiations with the Russians, Ukraine agreed that it would ship all of the warheads from the tactical nuclear missiles

⁶ See Ann Sheehy, 'Commonwealth of Independent States: An Uneasy Compromise', *RFE/RL Research Report*, vol. 1, no. 2 (10 January 1992), pp. 1-4; and Roman Solchanyk, 'The CIS and the Republics: Ukraine', *RFE/RL Research Report*, vol. 1, no. 7 (14 February 1992), pp. 1-5.

deployed on its territory to Russia for destruction by 1 July 1992 and that it would eliminate the remaining strategic nuclear weapons by the end of 1994. This undertaking was given without prior debate in the parliament, though, and the deputies were not to forget this. Moreover, this decision also appears to have been based on the belief that Western aid for the destruction of the ICBMs on Ukraine's territory would be forthcoming, and that it would speed up international recognition both of Ukraine's independence and its right to have conventional armed forces for its defence. In fact, despite frantic efforts by the former Soviet top brass to promote the idea of a 'unified' CIS army, at the CIS summit in Minsk at the end of the year, the right of the member states to create their own armed forces was acknowledged.

On 25 December 1991, Gorbachev appeared on the former Soviet central television channel to announce his resignation. That night in the Kremlin, the Soviet flag was lowered for the last time. Meanwhile, Yeltsin issued decrees asserting the Russian Federation's control over most of the remaining central structures and more foreign countries announced their recognition of the independent states which had emerged as the result of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Thus, the USSR formally ceased to exist. On the following day, President Bush announced that the United State would recognize the independence of Russia, Ukraine and several other of the former Union republics.

A few days later, in his televised New Year's message, President Kravchuk greeted the citizens of independent Ukraine with words of reflection on the historic significance of what had occurred during the last year and on the challenges that lay ahead. Ukraine, he emphasized, could pride itself on having changed the course of history by having played a key role in both bringing an end to the Soviet 'totalitarian super-empire' and 'stopping the uncontrolled, chaotic disintegration' of this 'gigantic, moribund' entity and directing the process of dissolution into 'the channel of civilized relations'. As 'the initiator and a co-founder' of the CIS, it had, in fact, made a major contribution to world history. By achieving independence, the president continued, Ukraine had moved from one epoch into another. Having finally been able to take charge of its own affairs, it would now itself be responsible for its own destiny. This meant that there was no place for euphoria and complacency, for freedom and independence needed to be bolstered by economic well-being,

order and understanding. The president thanked the population of Ukraine for its patience and perseverance at, what he acknowledged, was, a difficult time of growing social hardships, empty shop shelves, long queues and a rising crime rate. Alluding to even tougher times ahead, he called for unity, tolerance, conscientious work and for all sections of society to pull their weight for the common good. 'We have laid the foundations of the future Ukraine', Kravchuk told the Ukrainian public, 'and how it turns out will depend on every one of us'.⁶⁸