1990-10

Fog Ahead: The New Soviet Union

Treaty

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http://hdl.handle.net/2144/3459

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After the phrase "market economy," the term "union treaty" probably is the second most popular term in the lexicon of Soviet politicians. And among these I number not only Gorbachev and his "team," but also the politicians who are currently sitting in the union republic and autonomous republic parliaments, with the possible exception of the Baltic republics. Consequently, the question of the conclusion of a new union treaty is acknowledged to be the second most important problem in a huge mountain of intractable problems, each of which demands immediate attention. However, despite all the emphasis being given to it and the professional optimism that the government is displaying during the process of preparing the document, no one should believe in a rapid birth of this "problem child." Relations between the various union republics are a tangled skein—everyone pulls at his own end, and the result is only an even worse-ravelled knot. So that apart from our usual obtuseness I don't see any other reason for the optimism in official quarters. Just judge for yourselves.

In Moscow, the month of August was notable for the consultations that took place between the USSR Supreme Soviet and representatives of the union republics on this vexed question. On the last day of summer Gorbachev said at a press conference that the work on producing a new union treaty was entering a new phase. One wonders what phase it had been in until then. Alas, there is little to comfort one. It is a no-win situation.

Which Republics Will Remain?
Of the fifteen "fraternal" republics, only the three Baltic republics have declared unambiguously their intention of breaking the invidious fifty-year-old "family" relations tying them to the Soviet Union and of regaining their statehood and full independence. Similar calls are heard from Moldavia, the Ukraine, Georgia, and in fact from other republics as well, but in my view these claims are of a somewhat theoretical nature, unlike the policies followed in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. In any case, the legislative initiatives that have been taken by most of the republic parliaments in the direction of complete secession from the USSR are extremely timid and unconvincing. Consequently, I conclude that one can speak of the remaining twelve republics, excluding the Baltic countries, as possible parties to a new union treaty. So that the question arises, who is supposed to "treat" with whom? Maybe Armenia with Azerbaijan...

Nationality relations are not my special field. Accordingly I write as an ordinary citizen of this country who has become an involuntary witness to the war going on in the Transcaucasus. A war to which, to speak frankly, I can foresee no end. The government and the parliamentarians, as well as the specialists of interethnic relations, are contending with one another to find solutions, but in my opinion they are just throwing dust in everyone's eyes. The Nagorny Karabakh problem, for instance, is not so much a problem of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations, as a problem of the Soviet Union as a whole. I am willing to bet a hundred dollars to a ruble that you will not find a single republic in the USSR that does not have a territorial question to raise. If the Karabakh problem were to be resolved in the way that the Armenians want, a precedent would automatically be created for unending feuds and even wars between the "fraternal" republics.

Is A Union Treaty Possible?

In my inexpert opinion, the acuteness and complexity of interethnic and sometimes inter-religious relations in the Soviet Union make it doubtful whether it will even be
possible to conclude a new union treaty. Indeed, how can one be expected to believe
that a treaty is attainable when in the course of the same news program first we see a
prominent parliament figure telling viewers that the prospects for an agreement on a
treaty are excellent, and then literally as the next item on the program a commentator
announces that three republics have now been formed in Moldavia—the Gagauz and
Levoberezhnaya republics, in addition to the Moldavian Republic—and concludes this
mind-boggling piece of news with an official statement by the Moldavian Parliament that
these declarations of independence are all illegal?! On the one hand, all this makes no
sense whatever, but on the other hand, what are the Gagauzy and the other "foreign-
language" (inoyazychny) residents, as the term is now, of the former Moldavian
Republic supposed to do?

I visited Moldavia a year ago, and even at that time the degree of fear felt by the non-
Moldavian population struck me as extraordinarily acute. Since then, unfortunately,
nothing has changed for the better, in fact everything is steadily going downhill, so that it
is not difficult to imagine the state the population is in at the present time. What is more,
the same situation exists in virtually all the national republics. At the lowest estimate, in
the Soviet Union there are 60 million people living outside the borders of their own
national states. Almost all of these people feel nothing but dread at the prospect of
independence for the national republics of the USSR and what it will bring for
themselves and their loved ones. For this reason there are all the demands for reliable
guarantees in the future union treaty regarding the future status of non-indigenous
inhabitants. But who can provide such guarantees?

The Low Level of Culture

The incredibly low level of culture is the country's great affliction. I do not mean
education—lack of education is evidently a universal phenomenon. What I am speaking
of here is a human being's general culture and his ability to live and relate to his fellows.
The majority of us have not acquired this humdrum skill. How can one, for instance,
spend one's entire life in the Ukraine and yet not speak Ukrainian? On the other hand,
can one really blame someone for not knowing the national language of the country if this had never been required of him—it's not like Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita*, where one of the characters is terrified out of his wits and suddenly starts speaking a language he didn't know at all. This ignorance of another people's culture is the cause of many tragedies.

The last few years an expression has become common in our country: "Before you can unite, you need to divide things up." In other words, first of all a divorce, and then a wedding between the same partners, or a kind of divorce-marriage process which is the opposite of the marriage-divorce sequence normal everywhere else in the world. To continue with marital terminology, what we are seeing now is a process whereby the future happy spouses, i.e., the partners in the future union treaty, divorce and divide up the property they have jointly acquired. The questions remain, "How to divide everything up? What is to be split up? And who gets what?" Moreover, however upbeat the claims of the policy makers may be, there is no agreement between the future consorts, only endless discussions.

Everything that I have referred to so far is still only the tip of the iceberg. There are such a number of vast problems contained in the phrase "union treaty" that, quite frankly, one can only be amazed that there are people who are willing to try to move this mountain. The sole thing that everyone is agreed upon is the need to undertake the task. The only way out that people perceive is the exit from the USSR, but admittedly for many peoples this is no way out at all...

**Prosperity and National Antagonisms**

With regard to the question whether a union treaty is possible, I would like to cite the words of the prominent Polish film director and public figure Andrzej Wajda. When he was in Moscow two years ago we discussed the difficult relations between the Polish and Russian peoples. Wajda said the following: After World War One the French and Germans hated each other much more fiercely than the Russians and the Germans
hated each other after World War Two. Yet today there is virtually no border at all any more between the two countries, and there are plans for a common currency and the creation of joint military units. Franco-German relations are no longer a problem. Wajda went on to say that the secret of this metamorphosis is purely economic. Both the French and the Germans have an extremely high standard of living, and they know that they can obtain high quality goods and the standard of services they are used to equally well in their own country and abroad. If the level of human prosperity is raised, Wajda said, the great majority of problems will disappear of themselves...

I am certain that there is much truth in these words. If we are ever successful in creating on the ruins of the former Soviet "economy" something resembling the normal economic relations that exist in the civilized world, and in setting up market connections, such as are already being established among some republics, these links will suggest the future form and content of a new union treaty. It is necessary first of all to feed and clothe people, and to house them in decent conditions.

The West and Soviet Disintegration

I would like to make a final point. In my view, the West ought to take a strong interest in the nature of any future union treaty. Although on the one hand something has occurred for which many had hoped for so long, i.e., the disintegration of the Soviet Empire, on the other hand the West is now in danger of finding itself confronted with a whole crowd of hungry, exhausted, and apprehensive countries that lack even the basic necessities of life. Many Western politicians are beginning to understand the possible consequences of such a situation.

In Russia many view a new union treaty as something that cannot possibly be achieved in the near future. In the meantime, people see only fog ahead.