For the Europeans, Russia was only the promise of something to come. From where we sat, we thought everything was fine. But from over there, from Europe, many things looked puzzling and were hardly guaranteed to turn out as we were assuring them they would.

I had already decided that I had promises to my own people that had to be kept.

The party’s April 1991 central committee plenum was approaching. This next plenum boded only ill for Gorbachev as the party’s general secretary. On one flank, the worsening battle with the democrats was not likely to slacken, quite the opposite. On the other flank, the attacks of hard-line party leaders were becoming more severe. Sensing that Gorbachev’s position was weakening, his opponents were preparing a powerful offensive to remove Gorbachev from the post of general secretary and ultimately deprive him of support at the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies, many of whom were Communists, thereby making short work of his policies.

Realizing the danger, Gorbachev made an unexpected move. He convened the heads of the Union republics at a government dacha in the suburb of Novo-Ogaryovo and asked me to attend the meeting.

I had just returned from Strasbourg, and the conference at Novo-Ogaryovo came as a surprise. What Gorbachev then said at the meeting exceeded my expectations. The president of the USSR announced that he would consent to signing a new Union Treaty that would significantly weaken the influence of Moscow Center on the Soviet Union’s republics. He also very much advocated a new Constitution, after which the existing legislative bodies—the Congress of People’s Deputies and the USSR Supreme Soviet—would be dissolved and direct elections for a new president would be held. I agreed to set my signature to a joint statement of the republic leaders that had been prepared in advance. The West approved. The Washington Post wrote: “Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev changed his political orientation today in favor of a compromise with intractable Union republics and obtained support from his chief rival, Boris Yeltsin. At a meeting behind closed doors with deputies, Yeltsin said that Gorbachev ‘had made some important concessions,’ in decentralizing political and economic power, thanks to which, as Yeltsin noted, ‘the republics ‘may become sovereign states.’ Yeltsin reminded those attending the meeting that in the fall of the previous year Gorbachev had deceived Russia over
the draft of the 500-Day Program. 'This time Gorbachev has sworn to keep his promises. That was the most important thing,' said Yeltsin, remarking that Gorbachev 'for the first time has spoken like a human being.'"

With the agreements reached at Novo-Ogaryovo, Gorbachev was well armed for the central committee plenum. When the torrent of criticism came, he abruptly raised the question of confidence in him. With the republics’ support of the Union Treaty, Gorbachev knew the representatives from the republics at the plenum would not back a decision to ask for his resignation. He seized the initiative, and the plenum had no other choice but to approve Gorbachev’s line. In his concluding speech, Gorbachev stated that he did not go along with those who intended to declare states of emergency to stop the process of democratization and limit the sovereignty of the republics.

I signed an agreement in Novo-Ogaryovo to declare a moratorium on political strikes. After that, I flew to Kuzbas and asked the coal miners to stop their strikes. The miners went back down into the pits.

Despite these compromises, there was no way that my relationship with Gorbachev could have been called easy at that point. Having met Russia halfway in the Novo-Ogaryovo process, Gorbachev was still making every effort to prevent me from being elected president of Russia.

The question of my presidency troubled him terribly. As Oleg Shenin, former central committee secretary, later told investigators of the Russian procurator’s office,* "Gorbachev focused a great deal of attention on Yeltsin’s speeches and incidents at rallies and the congresses of People’s Deputies. He dogged Yeltsin’s every step and repeatedly gave me the assignment to locate some documentation about Yeltsin’s health. The health issue was reviewed at the politburo in 1987 or 1988." (Apparently, my first critical speech at the October central committee plenum was believed to be the result of a mental breakdown.)

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*The Russian procurator, is roughly equivalent to the U.S. attorney general or the British Lord Chancellor, but with more powers of investigation and prosecution. Shenin was under investigation for the August coup.—Trans.
I came to the presidency with the idea of making a clean break with our Soviet heritage, not merely through various reforms but geopolitically, through an alteration of Russia's role as a powerful, enduring, long-suffering nation.

Ordinarily, meetings at Novo-Ogaryovo, one of the Soviet president's residences in a Moscow suburb, went according to approximately the same scenario. First Gorbachev would speak in his dilatory, circumspect, manner; then he would invite us to begin a discussion. In the end, I usually had to seize the initiative myself if a fundamental issue was involved, and do all the arguing. That suited everyone fine. To understand, you would have to visualize the scene in the small ceremonial conference room, where everything glittered with state splendor, as a heavy pause would hang over the long table and those in attendance would try to hide their eyes.

With the existence of two centers, two poles, the Soviet Union and Russia, everyone else found it convenient to choose his own position and maneuver between the two centers. As a result, Gorbachev and I bore the entire moral burden for hashing out controversial issues. Oddly enough, our debates never came to unpleasant scenes or fights, which was surprising since we were essentially negotiating the limitation of the Soviet Union's central powers. Something seemingly intolerable for such a man as Gorbachev was happening—the restriction of power. A number of circumstances must be taken into account here, however.

First, outwardly, Gorbachev seemed to be at the head of this process, preserving his "paternal" image, initiative, and leadership—at least in the eyes of public opinion. Further, no one was infringing on the strategic role of the president of the Soviet Union; all global matters of foreign policy, defense, and a large part of the financial system would remain under Soviet control.

Second, in one stroke, Gorbachev was relieved of responsibility for the nationalities' conflicts. Or rather, his role in reconciling these insane bloody quarrels was changed; from the "man with a musket,"* 

*Reference to Nikolai Pogodin's story of Lenin's life as an underground revolutionary. It is also useful to recall that Gorbachev was supreme commander in chief of the Soviet armed forces, which had intervened in local ethnic conflicts in the Soviet republics.—Trans.
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Gorbachev was immediately transformed into a peacemaker, an arbitration judge.

Third, Gorbachev liked the role, unprecedented in world practice, of leader of not one but many democratic states. This was a very good staging ground from which to launch his entrance into the role of world leader.

Finally, there was the psychological dimension: the new arrangement dictated that Gorbachev and I remain normal human beings during the negotiations; we could cast aside our personal differences. The cost of each word at these negotiations was high; but when you are psychologically prepared for a difficult conversation, when all the controversial points had been previously worked out then it's no longer-like a politburo session, when every step out of line is treated as an attempt to escape.*

After the talks we would usually go into another hall where a congenial dinner awaited us with Gorbachev's favorite cognac, Jubilee. We would come out afterward, warmed and excited by both the reasons for the meeting and the meal.

While I was defending Russia's interests at the negotiation table, my aides had to defend them in other less enjoyable circumstances. They would usually try to put my car (the limousine of the president of Russia) first in line at the entrance. But one evening my automobile ended up at the end of a line of government limousines. My security people sprang forward in alarm, made an incredible U-turn, digging up the Novo-Ogaryovo lawn in the process, and finally put the car back at the head of the line—Russia first! Of course, boys will be boys. The manager of Novo-Ogaryovo was furious and threatened to fine us for the ruined patch of grass. Later, he backed off for some reason.

Perhaps from the outside, such a collection of “presidents,” who in fact had no real power, appeared somewhat ridiculous. Nevertheless, I now look back on these meetings without any embarrassment and even with regret. What an opportunity was lost! It is hard to say what could have been made of this Novo-Ogaryovo concept. Perhaps it would have been independence for the republics only on paper, not in reality, and Russia's clash with the central Soviet gov-

*Guards in labor camps used to shout at convicts as they marched in formation, "Any step out of line will be treated as escape!"—Trans.
eminent would have been inevitable in any event. Our departure from the USSR would have been far more peaceful and less painful. But after August 19, the Union disappeared all by itself; it was gone in a day.

Still, it was not just a "civilized divorce," as the press called the Novo-Ogaryovo Treaty. Gorbachev and I felt unmistakably that our interests, finally, coincided, that these roles suited us completely. Gorbachev preserved his seniority and I preserved my independence. It was an ideal settlement for both of us.

We began to meet at length unofficially. Sometimes Nursultan Nazarbayev also took part in these confidential meetings. One such meeting took place in Novo-Ogaryovo on July 29, 1991, and it was crucial. Gorbachev was to leave for vacation in the Crimean resort town of Foros on the Black Sea. The signing of the new Union Treaty was scheduled for August 20, immediately after his return from the Crimea. At this informal July get-together, we had the opportunity to once again go over the most urgent issues that each of us felt were still unresolved.

The conversation began in one of the rooms of the Novo-Ogaryovo house. As soon as we began to address topics that were extremely confidential, I suddenly stopped talking.

"What's wrong, Boris?" Gorbachev asked in surprise. It's hard for me now to recall what feeling I experienced at that moment. But it was an inexplicable sensation, the kind you feel when someone is constantly spying on you behind your back. I then suggested that we go out on the balcony because I thought we were being bugged. Gorbachev protested somewhat unconvincingly, but followed me outside.

I tried to persuade the president that if he was counting on a new renewed federation, the republics would join it only if it would replace at least some of its odious entourage. Who would believe in a new Union Treaty if KGB chairman Gennady Kryuchkov, who had the attempted coup in Lithuania on his conscience, was to remain chairman? Not a single republic would wish to join such a union. Or take Defense Minister Yazov. Could such a hawk from the old obsolete days be in the new commonwealth?

It was obvious that Gorbachev was finding this conversation difficult for he looked tense. Nazarbayev backed me up, saying that Pugo, the interior minister, and Kravchenko, chairman of Gosteleradio, both notorious hard-liners, definitely had to go. Then he
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added, "And what kind of vice president would Yanayev make?" Gorbachev said, "We'll remove Kryuchkov and Pugo."

Next I tried to convince Gorbachev to abandon the idea of combining the post of general secretary of the Communist party with president of the Soviet Union. Amazingly, this time Gorbachev did not reject my proposal out of hand. He even sought my advice: "Perhaps I ought to run for president in Soviet Union-wide elections?"

All three of us then unanimously decided that after the signing of the treaty, Valentin Pavlov, the current prime minister, had to be replaced. Gorbachev asked us whom we envisioned for this post. I immediately proposed an unexpected and interesting candidate who would have strongly reinforced the position of the treaty itself and the republics that had signed it. I said, "I propose Nursultan Abishevich Nazarbayev for the post of prime minister of the new Union." At first Gorbachev was taken aback, then quickly realized the value of this idea and said he was in agreement. "We'll discuss other candidates together after August twentieth," he said in conclusion of this conversation.

That was our last meeting before the coup, and I think much would have been different if what we had agreed upon as a threesome could have been put into effect. History would have taken a different course altogether.

Only a little time would pass and I would see with my own eyes how a transcript of this conversation could be used against me: After the August coup, investigators from the procurator's office discovered mountains of files with transcripts of tapes of Yeltsin in two safes in the office of Valery Boldin, Gorbachev's chief of staff. For several years everything I did had been taped—and those files were kept in the Kremlin. Among these tapes was the conversation the three of us had in Novo-Ogaryovo. Perhaps it is what triggered the August 1991 coup.
AFTER THE COUP

Editor's Note: Yeltsin writes of the awkward months between August and the end of December, when Gorbachev finally yielded power. The shift in authority is peaceful but strained. At their last meeting, Gorbachev seemed more interested in his compensation package and in handing over the top-secret historical files of the general secretary of the Communist party than he was in the significance of a historic transition of power in Russia.

After the August coup, all the republics had instantly reacted with declarations of independence. Presidential elections were scheduled immediately, declarations were made, and press releases were issued, by Georgia and Moldova in particular, saying that now they would not sign any Union treaty. All the governmental bodies of the Soviet Union were in suspension, and it was obvious that the real power was in the republics, above all the Republic of Russia. Neither the Council of Ministers nor Gosplan (the state planning agency) nor any of the other all-powerful bodies were making any real decisions; their function was merely limited to registering the existing situation.

The economy follows politics, after all. And in the political sense the principle of ruling from the center had so compromised itself that the republics had no other alternative but to opt for independent development.

Instead of a gradual transition from the unitarian Soviet Union to a softer, freer confederation, we had a complete vacuum at the polit-
ical center. The center—in the person of Gorbachev—was totally demoralized. The emerging national states had lost faith in him. Something had to be done.

From August 1991 until the moment of Gorbachev's resignation in December of that year, we had approximately eight to ten meetings. I don't know if Gorbachev realized how changed the nature of our relations were by then. I had told him that the coup had taught us a bitter lesson, and therefore I had to insist that he not make any personnel decisions without first obtaining my consent. He looked at me intently, with the expression of a person backed into a corner, but I had no other alternative. Everything depended on my taking a position of brutal consistency. In time I was proved right.

Despite my urging, Gorbachev made the first personnel appointments on his own: in place of the jailed coup plotters, Mikhail Moiseyev was chosen as defense minister; Leonid Shevardnadze was appointed KGB chairman; and Bessmeretnykh was retained as foreign minister. I knew very well that all of these people had been either overtly or covertly involved in the coup.

After the news agencies had run the reports of these appointments, I called Gorbachev at night and said: "Mikhail Sergeyevich, what are you doing? Moiseyev was one of the organizers of the coup and Shevardnadze is a man close to Kryuchkov, the chief coordinator of the coup." Gorbachev began to hem and haw: "Yes, it's possible I've gone off track, but now it's too late. All the newspapers have published the decree; it's been read over television." Finally, at the end of the telephone conversation, I said to him: "I will be in your office tomorrow."

I was amazed at Gorbachev's argument: it would supposedly be awkward to retract the announcement of the appointments. But were outward formalities more important than this real threat to the country's security? In his office the next morning, I first demanded that he dismiss Moiseyev immediately. He put up a fight, but finally conceded that he had made a mistake. He said: "I'll think of how I can correct it." I said: "No, I won't leave until you do it in my presence. Have Moiseyev come here right away and send him into retirement."

That very day, Moiseyev ordered his staff to destroy documents, particularly the coded messages dealing with the putsch that he
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himself had signed. Fortunately, one of the officers, a senior lieutenant who had been given a direct instruction to destroy the coded messages, made contact with our security service and informed them of the order. I was given a memo with the name and telephone of this senior lieutenant after Moiseyev arrived in my office. I gave this note to Gorbachev and said: call this telephone number and just ask this officer what he is doing right this moment. Gorbachev called him, and he answered: Captain So-and-so here. Gorbachev introduced himself and asked: what were your instructions? The captain replied: I received a directive from Moiseyev to destroy all the coded messages concerning the August coup. Gorbachev turned to Moiseyev and said: is there anything else you need to know?

Gorbachev and I agreed that the appointment of the new defense minister would be coordinated with the Council of Leaders of the Republics. The council was scheduled to meet within a few hours. I proposed Yevgeny Shaposhnikov, commander of the air force, as a candidate for defense minister. It was well known that he had comported himself courageously during the coup. No matter how much Marshal Yazov and those around him pressured him, Shaposhnikov did not succumb to provocation and did everything to prevent the air force from participating in the coup. There were no problems with his appointment.

No less important was to find a decent person for the role of KGB chairman, especially because such a person would have the job of destroying this terrible system of oppression that had been preserved from Stalin's day. The person who accepted this post would have to have experience managing a government agency. As I saw it then, Vadim Bakatin, who had headed the Interior Ministry before Pugo, could handle this job. Unexpectedly, Gorbachev consented to this proposal.

Next we came to the Foreign Ministry. I said that Alexander Bessmertnykh had followed instructions from the GKChP, that all the Soviet embassies abroad were sent coded messages in support of the GKChP, and that he had oriented the entire foreign service toward helping the coup plotters. We agreed on Eduard Shevardnadze, who had been Gorbachev's celebrated foreign minister, and had resigned predicting, correctly, a coup would happen. At 11:00 a.m., the Council of Leaders of the republics opened session and all of our proposed candidates were approved.
But each of these victories took an incredible amount of effort. How many more of them could there be—one, two, three? It became increasingly clear to me that these were all temporary concessions. Gorbachev had no evil intent in his unfortunate appointments to the three key posts in the government, defense, security, and foreign affairs. In the first two cases he had appointed the first deputies of the dismissed officials; in the third case he simply left the former experienced executive in place. But the evolution of the coup had illustrated that not only the first echelon of Soviet government leaders had been involved but also the second tier of their deputies. This was, after all, not a conspiracy of a few desperate generals, as happened later in October 1993, but a conspiracy of a government system that did not wish to be dismantled.

A paradoxical ambiguous situation seemed to emerge of its own accord. Gorbachev, the head of the country, was appointing as his immediate subordinates people who intended to overthrow him. The mechanism itself, the machinery of the coup, was being preserved untouched—the bureaucracies of the Union, where at all levels there were people prepared to impose a state of emergency.

I did not believe the people in the country wanted that. And I could not, I did not have the right to allow the rise of a new threat to Russia's security.

One night before the forthcoming session of USSR Congress of People's Deputies, the leaders of the Union republics gathered in the Kremlin to plan their tactics before the audience of the Congress. Long ago the majority of republic leaders had formed an unequivocal opinion: the Soviet Congress should be disbanded. This government body had outlived itself and was a relic of the past. But they also realized that the Congress would not agree to part with its former unlimited power without putting up a fight.

After intensive work, a joint statement of the heads of ten republics was drafted in which it was proposed to the Congress that interrepublican governing bodies be formed for a transitional period until a new USSR Constitution could be ratified. As soon as there was a new Constitution, the Congress should quickly wrap up its work and cease its existence. If this proposal was accepted, certain important articles of the current USSR Constitution should be suspended and power should pass from the Congress to a Council of Heads of State, made up of the president of the USSR and the leaders of the Union republics.
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Before August, when we were working on this and other documents, Gorbachev kept making compromises, did not dwell on trivialities, and maintained a coordinated position with the heads of the republics. But after the coup he did an abrupt about-face. In declaring sovereignty, republic after republic was drastically changing—as was plainly evident to everyone—the political composition of the already former Soviet Union. In the new reality, Gorbachev was left with only one role: the unifier of republics that were scattering.

We asked Nursultan Nazarbayev to present the statement to the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies. The proposal of a Council of Heads of State did not come as a big surprise to the Congress; it’d been prepared for such a scenario. Even so, the most excitable of the deputies threw themselves into defending the continued existence of the Congress. Words like treachery, conspiracy, plundering of the country, and so on were hurled from the speaker’s platform. Gorbachev always had trouble restraining himself when people said such nasty things around him, and when they finally drove him to the wall, he went to the podium and threatened that if the Congress didn’t dissolve itself, it would be disbanded. That cooled the ire of some of the speakers and the proposal for the Council of Heads of State went through without a hitch.

Next came vigorous, intense work at Novo-Ogaryovo. Gorbachev was now playing catch-up as the republics stayed always one step ahead of him. He made concessions that would have seemed unthinkable before August, conceding that the future Union could become a confederative state. Nevertheless, in Gorbachev’s conception of the union, a strong center would be preserved that would determine matters of defense and some fiscal issues. A single president would remain to serve as guarantor for compliance with the treaty; he would also represent the Union of Sovereign States (the “USS” was the proposed new abbreviation for the former USSR) in dealings with foreign countries. The post of prime minister was retained in the central government, and a bicameral parliament would be convened in Moscow.

To Gorbachev’s immense consternation, one after another of the former Union republics began to drop out of the Novo-Ogaryovo process. The first to go were the Baltic States (Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia), although Gorbachev had not really counted on them to stay. Then Georgia, Moldova, Armenia, and Azerbaijan withdrew. The atmosphere at the Novo-Ogaryovo sessions in October and
November of 1991 was now quite different from before the coup. Back then, most heads of republics could not bring themselves to argue with the president of the USSR, and even accused me of "extreme radicalism." Now they were pouncing on Gorbachev themselves without letting me get a word in edgewise.

Parallel to these meetings, an active process was underway in the republics, with announcements of their independence and election of new presidents. They all dreamed of elevating their own status; all of them wanted to become full-fledged members of the UN.

It was obvious that Gorbachev, not because of anyone's ill will, was, historically speaking, painting himself into a corner.

The situation grew more dramatic on November 25 when Gorbachev told the press at the opening of the next Novo-Ogaryovo meeting that the chiefs of state had convened to initial the treaty. In fact, the treaty was not ready for initialing since Leonid Kravchuk, president of Ukraine, had not come to the meeting, and the Azerbaijani leader Ayaz Mutalibov, as Gorbachev explained, "had been unable to come to Novo-Ogaryovo because of the difficult situation in his republic."

Gorbachev's announcement of the signing forced the republics' leaders to make fundamental changes in the draft treaty, largely involving a transfer of the center's remaining powers to the republics. The president of the USSR first began gently to persuade the others, then became nervous and irritated. His reassurances were not helpful, the leaders of the republics stubbornly demanded greater independence from the center, and neither gentleness, persistence, nor finally harshness on Gorbachev's part could stop the Union republics now that they'd had a taste of freedom. 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 hall.

We were left alone in the room, and precisely then, as a heavy, oppressive silence hung over the room, we suddenly realized that it was over. We were meeting here for the last time. The Novo-Ogaryovo 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 new.

All recovered from their surprise and dismay and gradually began to talk. No one wanted an uproar. Downstairs, reporters were impatiently waiting for news from a meeting that was supposed to be his-
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toric. It was already clear that it would not be historic, but a decent face had to be put on it anyway. We had to fetch the runaway president, something nobody wanted to be the one to do. Finally, Belarusian leader Stanislav Shushkevich and I were asked to go and bring him back. We went upstairs to his office and said, "Mikhail Sergeyevich, let's work together. We need to look for a way out together." He had been expecting us and immediately rose and came with us. The meeting continued.

No one signed the compromise draft that had previously been approved. Essentially, it was the death knell of the Novo-Ogaryovo process, not the Union Treaty. The official version of the story was as follows: the treaty was being returned for discussion to the supreme soviets of the republics, and after they approved the draft, it would be signed officially by the heads of the republics and the president of the USSR.

Unlike previous meetings, none of us went to speak to the reporters at the press conference. Gorbachev appeared alone, calling the meeting a success and announcing that on December 20, he hoped, the new Union Treaty would triumphantly be signed.

Nothing could be hidden from the political analysts, however. By the next day, virtually all the newspapers came out with pessimistic assessments of the prospects of the Novo-Ogaryovo Treaty. Everyone was struck by the fact that Gorbachev had appeared all alone at the news conference and that the signatures of the republic leaders were missing from the draft treaty. If the heads of the republics had not initialed the document at this meeting, what was the point of the supreme soviets ratifying the draft?

The following day new developments altered the situation even more drastically. In a December 1 referendum in Ukraine, the people of that republic unanimously voted for their independence. Kravchuk stated unequivocally that his country would not take part in the Novo-Ogaryovo agreements. This was the final blow to Gorbachev's protracted attempt to save the crumbling Soviet Union.

We had to find another way.

It was a wonderful winter evening with a soft snowfall—real crisp weather. Shushkevich, Kravchuk, and I had gathered at the residence of the chairman of the Belarus Supreme Soviet in the Belovezhsky Nature Reserve in Belarus. We were meeting to decide the fate of the Soviet Union.
THE STRUGGLE FOR RUSSIA

Looking at the outwardly calm but still very tense, even agitated, faces of Kravchuk and Shushkevich, I could not help but think that we were quite seriously letting go of Ukraine and Belarus perhaps forever, offering them in a new agreement a guaranteed status on a par with Russia.

The Belovezhsky meeting took place in the utmost secrecy; the residence was even guarded by a special security division. (Because of this extreme caution, some unexpected situations occasionally cropped up. We realized there was no Xerox machine in the residence. Each time we wanted to make copies of a document, we had to pass it through two telefaxes standing next to each other. At least we had them, thank God.) It seemed to me that Shushkevich was not prepared for such a psychological atmosphere and had imagined that this meeting would be different, more reflective and calm. He suggested we go hunting or take a walk in the woods, but no one felt like strolling. We were all too overwrought.

The tension at the meeting increased with every minute. Burbulis, Shakhrai, and Ilyushin had labored over the documents from our side. An enormous amount of work went into the conceptualization and formulation of the new Belovezhsky Treaty, and it was clear that all the agreements had to be signed right here without delay.

The idea of a new kind of state system had not been born yesterday, and not just in my head or that of Shushkevich or Kravchuk. If we recall the years 1917–1918, immediately after the democratic February revolution, the republics immediately began the process of succession, eventually moving toward independence. Several new national governments were declared in the territory of the Russian empire, including in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Ukraine led the process. The Bolsheviks managed to suppress all the nationalist uprisings, forcing peasants and soldiers into a civil war, although the revolution was supposedly spontaneously proletarian. With an iron fist, the Soviets strangled the liberation struggles, executed the national intelligentsia, and dispersed national parties.

As soon as the word sovereignty resounded in the air, the clock of history once again began ticking and all attempts to stop it were doomed. The last hour of the Soviet empire was chiming.

I understood that I would be accused of settling scores with Gorbachev and that a separate multilateral agreement with other republics was only a means to remove him from power. I knew that I would be hearing these accusations for the rest of my life. There-
fore, the decision was doubly difficult. Besides the political responsibility, I had to accept the moral onus as well.

I well remember how a sensation of freedom and lightness suddenly came to me in the Belovezhsky Nature Reserve. In signing this agreement, Russia was choosing a different path, a path of internal development rather than an imperial one. It was not a question of parts of the body of the former empire breaking off, although they had been conquered and annexed centuries ago. The cultural, social, economic, and political integration would sooner or later do its work, and these parts would still remain in a zone of common cooperation.

Russia had chosen a new global strategy. She was throwing off the traditional image of “potentate of half the world,” of armed conflict with Western civilization, and the role of policeman in the resolution of ethnic conflicts.

Perhaps I did not completely fathom the prospects opening up before me, but I felt in my heart that such major decisions had to be taken easily. Did I realize that by not preserving a central government in Moscow we would not be preserving an entire country, the USSR? I did. By that time, however, I had long since ceased to link the fate of Russia with the fate of the Communist party, the Council of Ministers, the Soviet Congress of People’s Deputies, the state supply office, and the other “historically” evolved bodies that had in fact always been a hindrance to Russia as a nation. Russia had only interested them as a source of raw materials, labor, and cannon fodder, and as the chief imperial “magnet” to which everyone—even Cuba—was to be attracted. Its order was to be imposed everywhere!

A united empire is a powerful and basic force, evoking both awe and respect; but how long could it have remained an empire? By that time all the other empires of the world had collapsed—British, French, and Portuguese—and it was even not so long ago that the United States as well had tried to take almost direct control over a whole range of countries on its own and neighboring continents, but had failed.

The Belovezhsky agreement was not a “silent coup,” but a lawful alteration of the existing order of things. It was a revision of the Union Treaty among three major republics of that Union.

We articulated and preserved the idea of the coexistence (actually quite strictly regulated) of states in one economic, political, and military region. But we departed from the old formula of Union gov-
ernment and control of everyone by Moscow. This seemed to us to flow from the spirit of the Novo-Ogaryovo process that had been interrupted by the coup plotters. The idea was to change the political climate utterly. Instead of dragging the republics by their ears into signing the new documents, we were demonstrating that we Slavic states had already achieved a working association, although not giving the others the opportunity for prolonged hesitation and bargaining. If you want, join us. If you don’t, that’s your prerogative.

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. Therefore, it is strange today to hear our actions being called a coordinated collapse of the Union or its “sudden destruction.” I know that this myth is not easy to overcome, but I want to emphasize once again: at that moment, the Commonwealth of Independent States (as it came to be called) was the only possible preservation of an integrated geographical region.

As I stood among the Belovezhsky pine trees, I recalled the tragedies of Tbilisi and Baku, the seizing of the television tower in Vilnius, and the OMON attack in Riga. All of this had not been so long ago! The next phase of these armed interventions was already in Moscow, in August 1991! Were we really going to wait calmly for a new tragedy, with our paws folded back like timid rabbits? No, I would not tolerate any more of it.

Starting in 1990, on the enormous territory of the former Soviet Union, Gorbachev’s vacillations between liberal and conservative policies began to wreak a mortally dangerous state of havoc. Freedom for the nationalities was lawfully permitted and even encouraged, in words. National parties were formed and elections took place. However, the Union tried to keep everything in its clutches. Then its grasp began to loosen. In Tbilisi, they wanted “merely” to clean the square of demonstrators—and nine people died. In Baku, in order to “stop the pogroms,” which had already ceased by that

*Nine people were killed in Tbilisi, Georgia, in April 1989 when Soviet troops attacked with tear gas and shot peaceful demonstrators. More than one hundred were killed in Baku, Azerbaijan, in January 1990 when Soviet troops imposed a state of emergency after pogroms of Armenians. Thirteen unarmed civilians, including a famous filmmaker, were killed by special Soviet units in Vilnius in January 1991, followed by OMON attacks in Riga in which some citizens were injured.—Trans.
After the Coup

time, they brought in Soviet troops. I am certain that Gorbachev could not have helped knowing about all these actions.

In my view, Gorbachev's swings were an insane policy, a double game, a deceptive compromise that had the country a hair's breadth away from an inevitable bloodbath and war between the center in Moscow and the republics. In order not to provoke a new, violent coup, and to defuse the situation, it was necessary to change the very warp and woof of mutual relations. If we were to take this in its larger political context, it would mean changing the relations between a new sovereign Russia and the USSR.

I was convinced that Russia needed to rid itself 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 in order to institute reforms. I was convinced that Gorbachev had exhausted his mental and decision-making resources, making him vulnerable once again to evil forces. That was how the decision came to me to make the multilateral agreement. That was why I was in the Belovezhsky Nature Reserve.

We decided, when the drafts were more or less ready, to get in touch with Nazarbayev to invite him as president of Kazakhstan to become a founder of the new commonwealth. Nazarbayev was at that very moment in the air en route to Moscow. It was an appealing idea to have his flight turned around so that he could immediately come to Belarus. We tried to communicate with his plane, but discovered there was no system we could use to get through to him. Then we tried to contact him through the dispatcher at Vnukovo Airport. This was a more realistic notion since Nazarbayev could speak to us from the pilot's cockpit and turn the plane back in our direction. But soon we learned that the heads of the Soviet Ministry of Civil Aviation were forbidding the airport dispatchers to let us use this official radio link. We were forced to wait for Nazarbayev's plane to land, whereupon he called us himself from Vnukovo.

Each one of us spoke to him in turn on the telephone. I read him the documents that had been prepared for signing. "I support the idea of creating the CIS," he said. "Wait for me. I'll fly out to see you." But we waited in vain for Nazarbayev that day. A little later, someone from his office called and sent the message that the president of Kazakhstan would not be able to travel to Belarus. When Gorbachev learned from Nazarbayev that he was intending to fly
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out to see us, he weighed in very heavily, calling in every marker to persuade him to abandon the trip.

It was important for us to have Nazarbayev present, at least in an observer capacity, but he decided otherwise. I don't think he canceled his flight to Belarus just because it was awkward to refuse Gorbachev. In those hours, Nazarbayev must have been thinking of the Eurasian context in which Kazakhstan was situated. To be sure, Kazakhstan shared extensive borders with Russia and common ties and interests. Still, situated as Kazakhstan was in the Central Asian region, Nazarbayev's other neighbors were most important, too. They had ethnic and spiritual ties. Well, what can I say—it was an independent decision. So, Nazarbayev did not come to the meeting, and the three of us capped this historic Belovezhsky Agreement with our signatures.

Some will say that surely there was some alternative, some other way out of the situation. I had not lost sight of the option of attempting to take Gorbachev's place lawfully. To stand at the head of the Union, to begin his reform "from above" once again. To traverse the same path that Gorbachev could not take because of the treachery of those closest to him. To gradually, carefully dismantle the imperial machine, as Gorbachev had tried to do.

There were various ways to achieve this. We could fight for elections for the president of the USSR throughout all the republics. We could declare the Russian parliament the legal heir of the dissolved Soviet legislature. We could persuade Gorbachev to make me acting president, and so on.

That path was barred to me. Psychologically, I could not take Gorbachev's place. Just as he could not take mine.

*After Midnight*

I really love cold water—I like it to be even icy cold. In late autumn when there isn't a soul on the beach, I plunge into the sea. I love clean forest ponds and creeks with stingingly fresh springs. I don't get leg cramps in even very low-temperature water; I am impervious to the cold. The water stings but draws me to its embrace.

It's the greatest thing after a sauna to jump into the water through a hole chopped in the ice. Saunas are also my weakness; not the dry Finnish sauna but the Russian banya, or steam bath, where you