



The Russian White House under Siege

AUGUST 19, 1991, SHOULD HAVE BEEN A regular Monday morning, but it opened on an unexpected note. Instead of the news, all Russian TV and radio stations were broadcasting Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*. Audiences across the country understood at once that something serious had happened in politics. Ever since 1982, major events such as the deaths of Soviet leaders (three in the span of three years) had been announced after national broadcasting of this sort.

At age sixty, Gorbachev was on the young side and seemingly too healthy to follow his immediate predecessors. However, he was not immune to actions from Kremlin hard-liners fighting against his liberalization policies. And act they did: an announcer reported that Gorbachev had fallen ill at his state-owned dacha at a Black Sea resort. "The new Soviet leadership" in Moscow would reinstate socialist "law and order."

At the time of the announcement I was already in a car and heading to the city from my state-owned dacha in a Russian government compound about fifteen miles from Moscow. Yeltsin occupied a house around the corner from me, though he had campaigned against such perks and had gained popularity by vigorously denouncing unwarranted privileges for top officials. The

compound served as a kind of out-of-office meeting place for members of the Russian government.

As I drove in, I noticed signs of unusual activity near the local traffic police station. There were armored personnel carriers, soldiers with machine guns, and men in gray raincoats with that unmistakable KGB look surrounding them.

"Do we go on or make a U-turn?" The driver turned to me, his face pale. I knew what he meant. Fear of the KGB's ruthless power was a key pillar of the Soviet regime.

I tried to make myself sound self-assured. "Go on, no problem," I told him. Already it seemed that this Monday morning was to be marked by encounters with what Dostoyevsky had identified as both the greatness and the darkness of the Russian soul. The Tchaikovsky music represented the pinnacle of Russia's cultural achievements, while the gray-clad men at the checkpoint evoked the horrors of the infamous Gulag Archipelago so vividly described by Alexander Solzhenitsyn. I saw before me a pivotal clash of extremes and was determined to take the right side. My Russian upbringing had instilled these kinds of literary images and moral absolutes in me ever since I was a boy.

As I returned to reality, I realized that the driver was following the usual route to the small, shabby mansion that housed the Russian Federation's Foreign Ministry, located far from the central government region. I asked him to drop me instead at the "White House," the colloquially named big white building that housed the Russian Parliament and the president's office. If anything were to happen, it would be there.

On reaching the government building at about 8:30 a.m., I teased a young policeman at the entrance in a friendly way, as I always did. "Hi, tough guy, so what's for breakfast in your handgun holder today?" He answered unexpectedly seriously: "Today it's a revolver. We are here to protect you." In numbers they represented no more than a squad and had no chance against the KGB Special Forces. Neither did we, I thought.

In the empty building I met Sergei Shakhrai, Yeltsin's key legal adviser. He had won his seat in the Russian parliament by popular vote against communist opponents. With an ironic smile, he congratulated me because the coup d'état we had been expecting from the hard-liners for at least ten months had arrived, and, of course, no preparations had been made.

"It's you who says it's a coup," I replied. "Though the plotters may be right

about one thing: they *are* the new Soviet leadership.” This was true—President Gorbachev had appointed the leaders of the coup only a few months prior. The head of the group was none other than Gorbachev’s handpicked vice-president, Gennady Yanayev, who had been approved by the Soviet legislature only on a second vote, and only under heavy pressure from Gorbachev. The other leaders were the prime minister of the USSR and the top ministers of Gorbachev’s cabinet: the heads of the KGB, Defense, and Interior (police). “If Gorbachev has fallen ill, as they claim, why shouldn’t they impose law and order, even in his absence?”

“We should demand that Gorbachev speak to the public, however ill he is. If he cannot do this, it should be confirmed by the best doctors and publicly announced. Otherwise it is a coup!” Sergei declared. “I will call Yeltsin now. He is still at his dacha with a few aides. They are working on a statement condemning the coup. It’s very important that when we were on the way here, the KGB stopped neither of us. I shall advise him to return to Moscow. Is there anything you would like to suggest to him?”

“I think my ministry should call the Western embassies, as well as the media, and ask their representatives to come here at, say, 10:30 a.m. By that time Yeltsin will be either in the White House or in detention. In any case, the world should hear from us and learn what is going on.”

Shakhrai dialed Yeltsin’s dacha and spoke to Gennady Burbulis, Yeltsin’s closest aide at the time. Burbulis had been a professor of philosophy (Marxist philosophy of course, as all other schools of thought were banned) in Sverdlovsk (now Ekaterinburg), the industrial center of the Urals. It was in Sverdlovsk that both he and Yeltsin had first won competitive elections to the parliament by running *against* communist opponents. Being a man of letters, Burbulis had a better knowledge of the key democratic concepts that both of them supported but he lacked Yeltsin’s charisma and ability to command big rallies. Known widely as the “Gray Cardinal,” he contributed hugely, perhaps decisively, to Yeltsin’s determined anti-communist stance in the critical years 1989 to 1992. Gennady was also a dear friend and mentor to me. That August morning he called back quickly. Our proposals were approved.

I immediately called my ministry and was pleased to find out that my key officers were in place and ready to do their jobs without needing explanation. It was a small staff—about sixty people. The Soviet Foreign Ministry housed thousands of diplomats and employees who were also doing their jobs, albeit working for the opposite political side.

At Burbulis's suggestion, we went to his office to meet a group of high-profile supporters from civil society, headed by the academician Yuri Ryzhov, a well-known physicist and outspoken supporter of liberalization in Russia. Ryzhov possessed both conviction and charisma, but refused later offers to serve as prime minister, claiming lack of expertise in economics. Later I succeeded in drawing him into a government position—ambassador to France—where he performed brilliantly. On August 19, 1991, he had simply walked into an empty, unguarded White House and was busy calling friends from the democratically oriented political clubs that had sprung up in Moscow in the late 1980s. And they came. Within a short time, no fewer than thirty scientists, lawyers, movie stars, and journalists had appeared. Even the world-renowned cellist, Mstislav Rostropovich, had taken an early flight back to Moscow from abroad to join the resistance. I felt encouraged and honored to be on the same side as them. The fact that these leading figures had gathered in Burbulis's office said a great deal about their faith in him, and our common cause.

Next we went to see the vice president of Russia, Alexander Rutskoi, who was checking his gun when we arrived. He told us that he was in charge of the defense of the White House against the coup plotters. Rutskoi almost matched Yeltsin for charisma and apparent determination, but his convictions were weaker, as was his commitment to (and knowledge of) civil society. Rutskoi was first and foremost a military man and a veteran of the Afghan war, for which he received the highest decoration, Hero of the Soviet Union. He first entered politics as a staunch communist and then, sensing the winds of change, broke with the party leaders to lead the so-called Communists for Reform.

Many democrats were concerned that Yeltsin had chosen Rutskoi instead of Burbulis or Shakhrai as a running mate in the presidential election campaign. I think he felt that Rutskoi would help attract parts of the broad military constituency. Unfortunately, his messy populism and habit of shouting hysterically at opponents instead of debating with them hardly endeared him to the white-collar civilian electorate and more thoughtful officers in the Soviet army. However, his bravery for the democratic side during the coup was critical and was the one important exception to his political behavior both before and after the coup.

After seeing Rutskoi, I headed to the office of the Russian prime minister, Ivan Silayev, a gray-haired man in his sixties. A former minister of aviation of the USSR, he had been approved by the Russian parliament as a compromise

figure after Yeltsin's more radical candidates, including Shakhrai, had been rejected.

That August morning, Silayev did not hesitate to denounce the coup on his own behalf and that of the cabinet, which had assembled to unanimously approve a resolution to that effect. Most of the Russian ministers were Silayev's people, and his leadership was a decisive factor for them.

Before long Yeltsin's successor as chair of the Russian parliament, Ruslan Khasbulatov, arrived and denounced the coup. Khasbulatov was an ambitious middle-aged former economics professor who had become a politician. But the fact remained that neither the Russian Federation's president, nor the government, nor parliament had any power. The Soviet state still controlled everything at that moment. But we all understood that presenting a united front against the hard-liners gave us tremendous moral authority.

David and Goliath, This Time in Moscow

Standing by the window in Silayev's office I watched shiny Mercedes and BMWs—then still rare in Moscow—driving western diplomats and reporters to the entrance of the building. At first it seemed strange that they were all coming from my right-hand side as I looked out the window. Then, turning my gaze to the left, I saw the unimaginable taking shape: battle tanks were creeping in single file along the bridge over the Moscow River toward the government building. These vehicles were rare guests too. They had never been seen before in the city other than in military parades on national holidays. In contrast to those dusty beasts they were sparkly clean. Mentally it was quite a captivating juxtaposition. It epitomized the choice Russia confronted at the time and has been facing ever since: to move forward to Western-style democracy or be drawn back into militaristic authoritarianism.

The symbolism of the hard-liners' move was no less obvious. The outsized display of force harked back to the worst Soviet traditions of intimidation. It could also be taken as a signal of doggedness, and fear crept between my shoulders.

A guard burst into the room: "Mr. Prime Minister and you gentlemen, please pick up some guns from the reserve stock!"

Silayev immediately countermanded the order: "No! Our weapons should

be different. We'll go to the press hall and tell the truth about what's happening to the diplomats and media representatives who have already arrived."

Walking to the Press Hall, someone recalled an old joke about a man calling the KGB to protest that his lost parrot spoke only for itself. No one laughed.

The press hall was almost full. On my way in, I saw diplomats from the Western countries. Poland, Hungary, and other Central and Eastern European nations that until recently had been in the sphere of Soviet influence were represented at the ambassadorial level. With memories of Soviet crackdowns on democratic movements in their own countries still fresh in their minds, they were quick to grasp the situation and show support.

Yeltsin read out the statement denouncing the coup and calling for Gorbachev's return, and turned to us with a question. Why had the coup plotters not hesitated to bring tanks into Moscow, and yet allowed him to hold a *press conference*? The answer was unanimous: the soldiers and officers, including the KGB agents, were reluctant to use force against the first ever popularly elected Russian leader, with an election just two months away. And, like most Russians, they were fed up with Soviet rule.

In the middle of the Q&A session, Yeltsin asked me to take over and he left the hall. In another moment CNN and the other world news outlets were transmitting video of Yeltsin shaking hands with the soldiers, climbing up on a tank, and denouncing the hard-liners. The photograph of the Russian president standing atop a tank was reproduced in news media all over the world and has become an enduring image of Russia's anti-communist revolution.

Small but fast-growing crowds began gathering around the White House in support of the revolution and the reformers. Within a few hours they had formed a full circle, a "living wall," around the building. We were winning in the court of domestic public opinion.

The overwhelming and unrestrained power of the communist dictatorship, which had terrorized Russia for more than seventy years, seemed unable to reinstate itself in the very center of Moscow. Yet the tanks were still there, and the government building was under siege. Only one telephone line connecting Moscow to the outside world was functioning. No cars were permitted to enter or leave. What we had won could be described less as a victory and more as a chance to succeed.

The leaders of the Soviet republics were silent, except for the heads of the three Baltic republics who asked the West for protection and recognition of their sovereignty. Others, as we learned later, were occupied with consoli-

dating their power and declaring independence. The major Western capitals were very cautious in their comments.

Yeltsin dispatched his old friend Oleg Lobov to Sverdlovsk, where they had worked in the Communist Party regional department, to organize a backup office in case the coup plotters squeezed us out of Moscow. I was sent abroad with a written order signed by Yeltsin to promote the position of the legitimate president and government of the Russian Federation. No government in exile was mentioned in the document, because it could be used against us if I were detained before crossing the Soviet border. But Yeltsin believed that according to international custom, a minister of foreign affairs could, without special credentials, declare a government in exile if the legitimate government at home had been overthrown.

"Tell the officials and the media when you arrive that you have credentials from the president of Russia to set up a government in exile," Yeltsin said to me during a meeting before my departure. "So, these crazy guys here will know that even if they kill me, they will still have a big problem."

I was honored by his trust in me and told him so. I also pointed out that I didn't think the situation in Moscow would ever reach the level where it would require a government-in-exile. While prenotification of the relevant officials would be helpful, it should be kept confidential as it was important not to weaken the message of our determination to win in Russia. Everybody, including the criminals in the Kremlin, should be aware of our resolve to rescue Gorbachev and bring him back.

I mentioned Gorbachev, fully aware of what might follow and was hardly surprised by the president's emotional response. "I know that you like Gorbachev more than me. They've told me that many times. But don't forget you are going as the envoy of the Russian Federation's president and government." For a moment Yeltsin could not suppress his envy of and disdain for Gorbachev. But he quickly returned to the matter at hand. "You know, Andrei Vladimirovich, how much we count on your professionalism. I concur with making no public statements about the government-in-exile for the time being. Why should we be constantly calling for Gorbachev's return? Shakhrai started this. And I agreed to refer to Gorbachev at the press conference. But those soldiers and people downstairs couldn't care less. They support the Russian president."

"Shakhrai and I, as well as Burbulis and those people standing outside, have no illusions concerning Gorbachev," I said to Yeltsin. "We all know the

difference between him and the first popularly elected president of Russia. In the West, however, many are still suffering from Gorbymania. We should come out as defenders of law and order and call Gorbachev back. That would make us, not the plotters, worthy of international support.”

“You are probably right. But first we must defeat the plotters, and then see to it that Gorbachev cannot appoint them, or clowns like them, again.” He was deep in thought, almost speaking to himself.

“I admire your courage, Boris Nikolayevich, and my heart will be with you.”

He stood up; we embraced. This is the right person in the right place and at the right time to change history, I thought as I left his office.

“Stand by Us”

As I was waiting to leave for the airport, I called my friend Allen Weinstein, then president of the Center for Democracy in Washington, DC, and later archivist of the United States. I briefed him on the situation in Russia, and he told me of the somewhat confused and mixed reaction in the West. Allen suggested that I write a commentary for the world media. I agreed. We started to sketch out the text, hoping not to be disconnected, over the next fifteen minutes. Weinstein finalized the article, working from notes, and the following morning (August 21) it appeared as an op-ed in the *Washington Post*. It was the first direct word from the rebellious Russian White House to the American public, and its title spoke for itself: “Stand By Us.”

Around midnight I left the White House. The scene that greeted me exceeded my wildest imaginings. The road leading away from the building goes along an embankment of the Moscow River, offering a gorgeous view over its broad and leisurely waters. On the opposite shore the iconic silhouette of one of Stalin’s seven “wedding cake” skyscrapers rose skyward. In the park in front of it stands a huge statue of the prominent Ukrainian poet and national hero, Taras Shevchenko. The mighty bronze figure on top of the granite rock is posed taking a resolute step forward, his head bent in deep thought. It was a perfect figure for that historic moment.

On my side of the river, near the White House, thousands of people were circulating in a friendly and cheerful crowd. Guys and gals in blue jeans (made in the United States) were mingling with soldiers of the same age in

military fatigues stationed near their tanks. Occasionally they would climb up on the tanks together and sit there, sharing homemade sandwiches and singing pop songs. They were simultaneously having fun and preparing to mobilize. The soldiers were waiting for orders to clarify why they had been deployed to the center of the city. Would those orders mean storming the White House, perhaps even firing into the crowd of civilians with whom they shared so much? And what about the civilians: would they commit themselves to stopping the soldiers in case of attack? The air was electric.

I called home, my wife Irina had no illusions about the dangerous situations we were in, but was calm and brave. She said that our daughter, Natalia, then eleven years old, would stay the night at the home of a classmate whose parents had offered a refuge for “our foreign minister’s family.” They, too, had heard the music and knew what it meant. That night, I knew what kind of people we were fighting for.

My friend and assistant, Andrei Shkurko, a young and gifted diplomat, drove me to Sheremetyevo Airport in his private car. We considered how best to avoid my being arrested by the KGB at the airport—something they would try to do, even if they had stopped short of storming the White House.

The KGB guys in Moscow were bureaucrats, we decided. They would expect me to use the VIP service and be on the flight to London, because they would certainly have intercepted our telephone conversations with the British embassy. But my ticket was to Paris, as the London flight was sold out. I decided to avoid the VIP lounge and use the regular service to France, letting the “fat major” from the KGB sit in the comfort of the VIP room and watch for the London flight. And so I did, and so he did, as I later I heard from my friends in the Soviet Foreign Ministry.

Despite having different visa and ticket destinations, I was allowed to go through the passport control checkpoint by the border guards, who happened to be sympathetic to our cause. I will always remember those guards with appreciation. A revolution begins when people in uniforms along with ordinary people get fed up with the old system. That’s the critical mass that makes radical change possible.

Soon after I took my seat on the Aeroflot flight, the cabin attendant came up to me and said in a low voice, “Are you a Russian minister? We’ve recognized you. You are on assignment, are you not? That’s what we thought. Welcome!” She hurried away with a conspiratorial look and air of triumph. In the course of the ensuing three-hour flight, I was given the royal treatment.

When the landing procedures began, the captain came to me and asked whether I expected anybody to be meeting me at the door of the plane. I appreciated the hidden meaning behind what appeared to be a simple courtesy question. According to international law, an aircraft is regarded as the territory of its flag state, the country where it is registered. Before I stepped out the door of the plane, I would still be on the territory of the Soviet Union. Thus, hypothetically, Soviet agents (especially those with diplomatic passports) could step in, push me back into the cabin and keep me there as hostage while denying access to the French authorities and demanding the quickest possible return flight to Moscow.

Apparently, the captain had heard anecdotes of this tactic used by KGB agents on would-be defectors to the West. I told the captain that I definitely did not expect to meet Soviet representatives in Paris, especially not at the door to the aircraft. But I would not be surprised to be met by French officials at the plane's door immediately upon arrival, as was the usual procedure for high-level envoys.

"Good," the captain said. "In that case we won't open the door before the French officials arrive at its threshold. If anyone else should show up"—he took a deep breath—"I think there could be technical problems with this door. It has needed repairs for a long time now, you know. But don't worry, we will do everything right!"

Again, I thought that the coup, and indeed the Soviet system, was doomed.

When we landed, a protocol officer from the French Foreign Ministry, along with a number of plainclothes officers clearly recognizable as security guards, greeted me at the door of the plane. They accompanied me during my stay thereafter.

The French officials helped with everything, from organizing meetings with ambassadors from the United States and some other countries to staging press conferences. The afternoon I spent at the French Foreign Ministry was rather frustrating, however. I felt that my interlocutors were morally and emotionally on my side, yet they were consistently evasive. I was not surprised. In coming to Paris I had no illusions: the West, however sympathetic to the democrats in Russia, would be careful not to anger the rulers in the Kremlin, no matter how deplorable they were. The fate of Russia would be decided in Moscow, not in Washington or Paris.

The French officials told me up front that at the same time they were speaking with me, a couple of high-ranking Soviet diplomats were in the

room next door. That delegation was presenting a quite different assessment of the events unfolding in Moscow.

“Actually, they are all familiar faces to you, led by your former boss, Vladimir Petrovsky, Mr. Kozyrev,” one of my hosts said. Petrovsky had led the “subversion by formulations” team in the Soviet Foreign Ministry. Was he ditching his principles to pursue his career now? I felt sick to my stomach. (I had the same sensation years later seeing my former deputies and friends Sergei Lavrov and Vitaly Churkin defending Putin’s intervention in Ukraine as foreign minister and ambassador to the UN, respectively.) “Would you like to meet the Soviets, or would you prefer to wait an extra minute or so here while they pass through the corridor?” the French official went on.

“Actually, I would rather enjoy an extra cup of coffee here and let them leave,” I said. The French official nodded understandingly. “This seems to be the only point on which you Russians have concurred so far.”

But not all Soviet agents were so polite to me. When my French hosts brought me to the Hôtel de Crillon on the magnificent Place de la Concorde I received a telephone call. An artificially altered voice told me that the KGB had a long reach, even in Paris, not to speak of Moscow where I had left my family. The last point made me shiver.

Back in Moscow, a fresh group of military and security forces started an offensive against the defenders of the Russian White House on the night of August 20–21. The plotters ordered tanks to move to the barricades. That action was shown live on CNN and other TV channels all over the world. I was watching and commenting on those events live all night long from the BBC office in Paris.

I pointed out the striking similarity of the scene in Moscow to that of the night assault that Soviet tanks and commandos had launched on the TV station in Riga earlier in January. I argued that the proper response from the world community to this latest assault should be the immediate recognition of the Baltic states as independent countries. My call for full recognition was only partially an emotional response to the moment: over the past eight months, the Yeltsin government had had a number of meetings with the new democratic authorities of the Baltic republics, and we knew that they would never return to the Soviet system, whatever it cost them.

Back in March, Estonia’s foreign minister (later its first president), Lennart Meri, a freedom-loving intellectual, had come to Moscow, where we had signed a declaration of friendly relations between the Russian and Estonian

republics. Similar agreements were then reached with Latvia and Lithuania. The documents all stipulated the obligation of the Baltic republics to protect the rights of the Russian minorities in their countries. In signing these agreements, Russia became the first to establish official relations with these new states that were once designated for Soviet rule as part of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact with Nazi Germany in 1939.

By the time I left the BBC's offices, the assault had evidently failed. But the White House was still under siege, protected by barricades and a living wall. Things seemed at a standstill, but I was able to reach Yeltsin's office by phone, and his aides sounded upbeat.

That third day also marked a clear turning point in the world attitude toward the events unfolding in Moscow. President Bush and the leaders of other Western countries had telephone conversations with Yeltsin and issued public statements rebuking the coup plotters.

In Paris, I had warm and friendly meetings with the foreign affairs minister, Roland Dumas. I was also received by the French president, François Mitterrand and enjoyed his high-style polite and seemingly aloof intellectualism even if initially it felt cold and somewhat arrogant. Yeltsin could never overcome this barrier, and Mitterrand, perhaps suspecting deep-seated populism and earthiness in the Russian, made little effort to help him. They were too different. In conversations with me though, which the French president granted every time I was around, he revealed compassion as well as a deep interest in history, especially Russian history. His initial acceptance of the coup was apparently prompted by the traditional obedience of Russian people to their authoritarian rulers. Later he was elated when such tradition was broken in those August days. In Paris I also met the US Ambassador and was invited to make a speech at the forthcoming meeting of the NATO foreign ministers, scheduled for August 23, in Brussels. On the evening of the twenty-second I flew to the capital of Belgium. It was my first visit to the city of my birth, since I had been taken to Moscow at the age of three months, and the hosts kindly showed me the hospital where my mom had given birth.

Early on the morning of August 23, I received a call from a friend in the Russian White House saying that the coup attempt had been defeated. Yet again I had been given a new life in Brussels, but this time I stayed only three hours instead of the three months I had been there after my birth. My mission seemed to be over, and I informed my hosts of my desire to return home.

While preparing to leave for Moscow, I first met with the Belgian foreign

minister and then with the US secretary of state, James Baker. The next morning's papers carried a big photograph of Baker and me embracing and smiling happily for reporters. Baker was holding his hand high and giving the victory sign.

I was impressed by Baker's knowledge of Soviet socioeconomic problems and his genuine desire to help solve them. I suggested that a new partnership be developed between Russia and America. As to the fate of the Soviet Union, I said, it now depended on the willingness of Gorbachev to part ways with his communist friends and on his and Yeltsin's ability to rise above their ambitions and work together on meaningful political and economic reforms. I felt deeply skeptical on both points but did not share my misgivings with Baker.

This much was true: a unique historic opportunity was at hand.

Citizens of the Free World

On returning to Moscow, I went immediately to a rally of a million people on the Manezh, the vast square near the Kremlin. Speaker after speaker called for reforms to guarantee that there would be no return to the past. I was pushed to the microphone. By that time in my life I had had some experience speaking at rallies, but nothing like this! When you see an ocean of faces looking at you and waiting to hear from you, it becomes difficult to formulate any thoughts. It is also quite difficult to control your voice so as to be heard without shouting. I did grasp that like the other speakers, I was expected to speak of a wonderful future and about what should happen, rather than to address the reality of the moment.

"Citizens of the free world! Today we earned the right to call ourselves and to be called free. We've just defeated a brutal attempt to throw us back to the humiliating position behind the Iron Curtain. There is no more and will never again be a free world somewhere outside and a different world inside here. We will learn to live in the same free world as other people do.

"In foreign policy, democratic Russia should be as natural an ally of the democratic United States and other Western countries as the totalitarian Soviet Union was their enemy.

"Clearly, it will take time and hard work to implement this vision of a new Russia. But we must stick to our course and not compromise our principles."

A storm of applause followed each of my sentences.

After the rally, I walked the few blocks to the parking lot in the company of Western and Eastern European ambassadors and a few reporters who had also attended the gathering. They wanted to know how much would actually depend on the Russian government. Gorbachev remained the president of the Soviet Union, and the Soviet Foreign Ministry still reported to him. Other governments would have to take them and only them as counterparts.

"From now on," I answered, "Gorbachev and Yeltsin will work together, and their teams and we will follow suit." I hardly believed my own words as I spoke them.

After the rally I rushed to the White House and to Yeltsin's office. He rose from his armchair in the far corner of the room and embraced me.

"I told you it wouldn't be long," he said. He quickly got to the point: "We need to think of strong moves now to consolidate our leadership in foreign policy."

"Speaking of strong moves, I think there is one . . ."

At this Yeltsin lifted his hand quickly and his expression became almost wily. "I know what you are going to propose. In Paris you offered full recognition of the Baltic states."

"You read my mind, Mr. President, as always."

"Some foreign policy experts," he continued, trying to sound stern, though clearly enjoying himself, "think that was too much to promise without consulting the president."

"I simply spoke my mind—knowing, though, that the Russian president, in contrast to the Soviet one, would be strong enough to take this step."

How nice, I thought to myself. Those "some" are back at it. And now they are reporting on me—disparaging my moves as too quick and painting me as insubordinate. I felt that their true target was my pro-Western policy, which they hoped to change by getting rid of me. Thus, the bureaucracy strikes back.

"Now, Andrei Vladimirovich," Yeltsin admonished, his bass roaring triumphantly, "please do what the president instructs you to do! In an hour I expect the representatives of the three Baltic republics to come to this office." He paused to see the effect of his declaration on me. "Yes, I've invited them in order to announce the official recognition by the Russian Federation of these republics as independent states. Please get everything necessary ready and come back with the representatives."

That was one moment in which I simply adored him.

I rushed to telephone my deputy, Andrei Kolossovsky. Kolossovsky was a gifted young diplomat with calm manners and strong convictions. He had followed me in abandoning a promising career in the Soviet foreign service and joining the Yeltsin team. He had been on vacation abroad when the coup began and, against my recommendation to stay put, had returned to Moscow on the first flight on August 19. "Hello, boss," I heard Andrei's voice from behind me as I held the phone. He was smiling. I was always happy to see him. His humor, intelligence, and manners were like a breath of fresh air in those corridors.

"Hi. Being your boss is like a mission impossible. So, it's not for me. But I have good news for you. Even a mister know-it-all like you would be surprised by the assignment we've just gotten from the big boss."

"I think I'm here to report to you that the assignment you refer to was fulfilled a minute ago. Three draft decrees by the president of the Russian Federation announcing the official recognition of the three Baltic states are in this folder. The representatives of those states are waiting in the reception room. The media is getting ready to shoot photos of the historic event."

The Baltic representatives felt that something very important was coming. We entered the president's office together. Yeltsin stood up and showed Andrei and me to our places beside him. His tone was solemn: "Distinguished representatives, I invited you today to announce that the president of the Russian Federation has decided to officially recognize Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia as sovereign and independent states. I will now sign the corresponding decrees and give copies to you."

He went to his desk and slowly signed each page. This habit of signing decrees on the spot, in the presence of officials and journalists, and the slow, solemn movement of the pen were characteristic of him. He also showed everybody his pen.

"This is the pen with which I signed the decrees and documents against the coup. I am using it now to sign the recognition papers. You can appreciate the symbolism," Yeltsin declared. He was a man of high drama. He liked to perform history. This was a moment when he did it well, and I admired him for it.

A ceremony that was both solemn and emotional followed. One after another the representatives spoke of the historic importance of this decision for helping the Baltic states build new democratic societies with equal rights for all who lived there—Balts, Russians, Jews, and all others.

"What effect will this act of recognition have on Gorbachev's position?" a Latvian diplomat asked.

"If he has any brains he will immediately follow suit. Otherwise the Soviet Union will once more be just trailing in the wake of the events," Yeltsin replied bluntly.

In the next few days there was an avalanche of recognitions. Country after country made official statements. The Soviet Union's recognition did not arrive until two weeks later on September 8.

The next morning, August 25, the parliaments of the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation assembled in a joint session to condemn the coup attempt. From the podium of the parliamentary assembly hall, Yeltsin held up a draft decree banning the Communist Party of the USSR and declared he had already signed the document. After a standing ovation, he asked whether Gorbachev would change his mind and sign it too. Gorbachev was obviously hesitant, but Yeltsin took his arm, led him to the center of the stage, and asked him to sign on the spot, which Gorbachev did, to a burst of laughter from the audience. The whole gathering, including the signing episode, was carried live on state television.

Two days later I was summoned to the prime minister's office for a short meeting of the cabinet. Almost all the ministers were given new assignments. Some were to replace their Soviet Union counterparts, who had lost credibility and position after supporting the coup. Some, including me, were given new addresses to house their offices and staff.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Republic was now assigned to the building that only a day before had been occupied by the International Relations Department of the Communist Party. At the entrance police cadets sternly demanded my ID, but on seeing it saluted enthusiastically. For me, taking over the offices of the former communist stronghold was invigorating, but also a bit surreal. For generations of Soviet citizens the huge gray building near the Kremlin had been a special landmark associated with the menacing omnipotence of the party. Small wonder that everyone who had entered those doors did so trembling. Now I walked through empty corridors and rooms. Documents that had been top secret only few days earlier were now discarded like autumn leaves, useless, turned into refuse by the winds of history. It was the final coda of a long saga. For more than seventy years, the Soviet communists had spent millions of dollars and immense efforts to stir up revolutionary movements all across the globe. At the beginning, they

seemed to genuinely believe they were helping the poor of the world fight for freedom and equality. Yet first Stalin and then all his successors cynically used communist parties and revolutionaries worldwide as their own fifth column proxies in the global confrontation with the West. Some of those organizations in the third world evolved into terrorist groups; some were that way from the beginning.

I knew the place well, since I had served there for six months as an intern before graduating from university. I had been interpreting for visiting English-, Spanish-, and Portuguese-speaking “brother” communists, mostly elderly functionaries. I felt good helping guests from the Portuguese colonies in Africa: Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau. Most of them were younger and passionate, fresh from the battlefield and devoted to their independence movements. It was a prestigious assignment, but not the most celebrated: the children of the party bosses generally preferred internships in Soviet embassies in Western countries. During the time I was there over the next four months of 1991, foreign and Russian visitors often asked me for a sightseeing tour of the building.

Just a few days after the successful end to the coup, President Yeltsin vanished from public view. I had no access to him, but one of his personal assistants who had worked with him for a number of years told me not to worry: Yeltsin was just following his usual life pattern of falling into a depression and withdrawing following an outburst of energy during a crisis. Later Yeltsin told the press that he had been on vacation for about three weeks in the southern resort of Sochi on the Black Sea and showed us pictures of himself playing tennis on a sunny court.

He remained largely inactive in public for a few weeks after his return. Apparently, like Gorbachev, he had no clear vision of what needed to be done to complete the transformation from the Soviet system. One thing was clear—these two men could not work together. They were more interested in their personal struggle for power against each other. That was the level of leadership we had after the long devastating decades of communism.

Did We Actually Defeat the Coup Plotters?

Following the failure of the August coup, I had no illusions that it would be easy for democracy to replace the fallen communist regime. In the absence

of strong leadership from either Gorbachev or Yeltsin, the momentum crucial for reform began to slow, and the mood of society grew less optimistic.

One central issue was that the fate of Russia was intrinsically tied up with that of the KGB. The core cadres of the KGB had long since abandoned communist ideology as a useless anachronism. In fact, many in the organization dreamed of getting rid of the party high priests, blaming them for the state's technological and economic backwardness. Ready to change the red communist flag to a nationalist Russian flag, they were prepared to accept some market reforms and even liberal ones, as long as they retained control behind the scenes.

I once asked Yeltsin why on the last day of the coup he had stopped thousands of protesters from taking over the KGB headquarters, and blocked Russian democrats who sought to follow the example of other Eastern European democracies in denouncing and dismantling the Soviet-era secret police and banning its former agents from public service.

He replied: "The KGB is the only organized state structure left by the old regime that works. Of course, it was criminal like everything else, but if we destroyed it, we would have risked unleashing total chaos." I had an opposite opinion but kept it to my self.

I had two more memorable conversations shortly after the coup's failure. A real Soviet dissident, a human rights activist who had recently served five years in a KGB labor camp, visited me. I can still see his striking eyes and pale face (he could have been anywhere between thirty and sixty years old), even though I cannot recall his name. "You have to agree that the recognition of the Baltic states and the decree banning the Communist Party of the USSR are the only two achievements proportional to the great opportunity and the thirst for change that was in the air after the defeat of the coup," he told me. I did not dispute the words of my guest. He had a point and in any case deserved attention and respect. "Yeltsin," my visitor went on, "was good to stand against the coup, but protected the KGB. When he gets what he wants, the real power, he won't use it for building the democratic and market institutions needed to transform the country. You—Shakhrai, Burbulis, the young people in the Russian leadership—should select a new leader and demand that Yeltsin resign."

"It's really too much of a task for me," I replied. At the time, his suggestion smacked of a second, if softer, coup attempt, I thought defensively. But at the

back of my mind I knew that he was right in his assessment of Yeltsin, and that if we failed on the essence of his demand in the long run, we would be defeated.

The other conversation I had was with my mother. She had a heart attack on the day of the coup and I was trying to cheer her up by reassuring her about what had been achieved. "We won an important victory. This country will never be the same totalitarian monolith it was for seventy years. There is a good chance to transform it into a modern society."

She had her doubts: "You've always lived in a world of illusions. There were some expectations that things would improve after the defeat of the coup. But those are quickly vanishing. Folks are standing in even longer lines for food than before. And speaking of you, you've stirred some very troubled waters. You will face much tougher resistance to what you are standing for. More than once this country has rejected change and its advocates. There are simply too many people now in power who want to hold on to it at all costs—besides that, the inertia of ordinary people who are used to hating and fearing everything new and bright is too strong."

"Believe me," she continued, "Yeltsin is a mixture of both those breeds, and that's the secret to his staying in power thus far and to his survival in the future. I know his type from my youth, when I was one of the young party activists. His agenda is very different from yours and your kind of people's. He is just using you in his power struggle, and he will soon throw all of you away. But I see that you will not turn back. So just be careful and remember your family."

I recall both these conversations every August on the anniversary of the defeat of the coup attempt.

Every year the Russian press also covers the anniversary of the coup, but in a more and more skeptical and reserved way. On the tenth anniversary of the August coup, a US correspondent, Peter Baker, interviewed the commander of a Soviet battalion that had been sent to attack the Russian White House, but instead had used its arms to protect the democrats on the street: "What was lacking? Why did it happen this way?" he complained. "It is hard to say that there wasn't enough courage to bring things to the end. We wanted more and envisioned more, especially in the economic field. The main thing is that the same people remained in power—the people who used to work in the party apparatus."

None of the coup plotters had to live in seclusion or face a life of shame: they were all granted amnesty in February 1994 as part of a sweeping resolution by the new parliament, the Duma. Their leader, Gennady Yanayev, presided over a well-to-do foundation. His team member, Vasily Starodubtsev, was governor of the Tula region. One of the plotters headed a party. Another chaired a Duma committee. A key plotter, KGB head Vladimir Kryuchkov, could be seen on national TV participating in the inauguration and other prestigious events of President Vladimir Putin's public career.

Sometimes I ask myself whether I would have stood up against the coup in August 1991 had I been able to foresee the future. My answer is yes.

The defeat of the coup attempt was the highest moral and political point ever reached by the Russian people. It demonstrated their democratic potential and thus established an important historical precedent. And it set the stage for what was to follow: The official, irretrievable end to the Soviet Union in the weeks and months ahead, and the birth of a new Russian state on the uncertain road to democracy.