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The Kremlin is no longer an ideological centre

From USSR to Commonwealth:

First steps first troubles

By Vladimir Orlov

In Kiev, the capital of the Ukraine, this newly independent and powerful nation - the Republic that dealt a death blow to the Soviet Union - it is still possible to find a sign reading "Hail to the Motherland, the USSR"

Although the new Commonwealth of Independent States covers almost 97 percent of the old Union territory, the differences between the old Soviet empire and the amorphous euro-asian Commonwealth go far deeper than the problems involved in buying railway tickets or computations of surface area. The new situation has its own potential for misery and for civil war.

If the USSR was the "prison of nations", the Commonwealth is a halfway house. It is not designed to draw the republics together, but to smooth the disengagement of nations after decades of forced union. For that reason it will not simply replace on label with another. It is Russia, not the Commonwealth, that has won international recognition as heir to the Soviet Union.

"The Commonwealth is not a state" Boiris Yelzin declared, and for that reason it has been denied the trappings of nationhood. There is no flag, no anthem, no president, parliament or passports. The Kremlin and the Central Bank, once ideological centres of the old central government, now belong to Russia, not the Commonwealth. There is a Commonwealth capital - Minsk in Belarus - but the choice fell in order to keep the commonwealth away from the real centre of power in Moscow.

Perhaps the Commonwealth's most important attribute is a centralised military command. But if developments proceed according to Yelzin's plan, the command's chief function will be to preside over the destruction of much of the old Soviet nuclear arsenal and transfer the rest to Russian control. Over a course of years the army itself is likely to subdivide into republican armies.

The relative emptiness of the Commonwealth concept is meant to ensure that it will not be used to bring the republics under centralised rule again.

An important model for the Commonwealth is the EEC, which is aiming for a common economic, political and military space without trade barriers, visa requirements or border guards between mamber states. The CIS has started life with a common currency and united military command, things not shared by the EEC.

Over the long term, however, the Commonwealth promises to be even looser than the European Community. The future of the ruble and of the military is very much an open question. Unlike the Commonwealth, the EEC has a parliament, president and administrative commission - as well

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as the will to create ever closer ties. In contrast, people in all parts of the former Soviet Union are giving their allegiance not to the new Commonwealth but to Russia, or one of the other constituent republics. The CIS seems to be moving in the direction of the British Commonwealth, another fossil of a dead empire.

In view of this, is the Commonwealth of Independent States really neccessary? The answer is in my view an emphatic yes.

This year's once in a century paradigm shift may satisfy the national yearnings long repressed under the Soviet system, but it does not, by itself, end the Soviet economic and political crisis. In some ways the loosening of ties between the republics makes that crisis more accute.

Some republics are already putting limits on the quantity of goods visitors from other republics can buy. Some republics possess raw materials that must be processed by others, leaving the way open for threat and counter-threat.

''It is a stupid situation that we have two of the biggest plants of the former Soviet Union for the refining of gasoline, but we have no oil fields'' says Michael Dobrov, vice chairman of the Ukrainian Innovation Bank. ''The plant works with Siberian oil, but now Yeltsin and his men do not want to sell us oil, but they do want to buy our gasoline.''

It was these inter-republican frictions - from train tickets to gasoline shipments to nuclear weapons - that the Commonwealth is designed to head off. Within its first months of existence, the new structure will be put to the test on political, economic and military fronts. Even as the Commonwealth was being born rebellion was raging in Georgia and in the Chechen Republic - a part of the Russian Federation, as well as in Armenia and Azerbaijan. How the republics respond collectively to such conflicts will tell much about the prospects for stability.

So far the republics seem resolved to keep out of each others's affairs. Russian troops were ordered out of Azerbaijan's predominantly Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, and Russia says it will also stay out of Georgia' violent ''internal affairs''.

But what if the conflicts continue to fester? or worse, threaten the stability of other republics? The solutions should be found not only in Moscow and Minsk, but in the United Nations.

According to Yeltsin's estimate it will take a year to stabilise the Russian economy. Other republics have agreed to co-ordinate their economic reforms, and continue use of the ruble, effectively ceding control of their monetary policies to Moscow. But if the economy continues its plunge, they will be under pressure to go their own ways.

Another potentially divisive issue concerns the Soviet foreign debt, estimated at more than 80 billion us dollars. The Ukraine insists on having accounts from Moscow on where spending went, and some Ukrainian bankers claim their Republic should have a positive balance. The Ukraine ordered the printing of billions of coupons to phase out the ruble, even before the Commonwealth was formed. Alexander Savchenko worked out a complex strategy for privatising state assets and exchanging rubles for the new currency. Amid the chaos, there is a powerful incentive for stability, in particular the promise of integration in the world economy. Some western observers have already pointed to the signs of hope and some have seen some of the best opportunities in the world for investment with the huge protected market, well educated labour force and the natural resources of the CIS