



1989-1991

# THE SOVIET UNION: HOW AN EMPIRE IMPLODES

Fall session

1989: A Key to Understanding  
Today's Geopolitics

Powerful Women in History

# The Soviet Union: It's history

## Government folds; residents now face big economic woes

MOSCOW (AP) — A skeleton Soviet legislature followed Mikhail S. Gorbachev's lead today, voting itself out of existence after a parade of nations recognized Russia and other republics of the new Commonwealth of Independent States.

Russia's red, white and blue flag was flying alone over the Kremlin but the mood in Moscow was anything but ebullient.

The ruble is nearly worthless, shortages are widespread and residents are wondering how they will cope when President Boris Yeltsin of Russia lifts price ceilings next week.

Rifts between republics of the new commonwealth also were coming into sharper focus.

Ukraine on Wednesday accused Russia of refusing to distribute new rules to other republics and renewed its complaint about the dominant former Soviet republic's unilateral decision to free prices, RIA Novosti reported.

Russia, which has taken over the Soviet mint, started printing 500-ruble bank notes for the first time this week and had promised to distribute them throughout the former Soviet Union. The new 500-ruble notes reflect the plummeting value of the currency.

In a poignant, 40-minute session in the Kremlin today, the Supreme Soviet voted itself out of existence and recognized the new loose federation of sovereign states replacing the Soviet Union.

The recently appointed speaker, Kazakh writer Aynur Bekisbayeva, concluded the session with a touching farewell to lawmakers. "Until we meet again, wherever that may be."

Outside the panel yellow building during the session, a bronze plaque identifying their office as the home of the U.S.S.R. Supreme Soviet was removed.

Former Soviet citizens showed little regret over Gorbachev's resignation. Many directly blame him for their crumbling living standards.

"He should have gone three years ago. His perestroika brought us nothing. He is to blame for our poverty," said Ivan Petrov, a war veteran who receives 185 rubles a month, or about \$3.

But Gorbachev, whose reforms freed tens of millions from authoritarian Communist rule and encouraged the end of the Cold War, said in his intended resignation speech that he had no choice but to follow the course of reform.

Gorbachev made clear he was withdrawing only from the government and said he would continue to play a role in the loosely formed commonwealth endorsed by 11 of 13 former Soviet republics.

After the speech, he signed a decree giving Yeltsin charge of the 27,000-warhead Soviet nuclear arsenal. Russia also inherited the complex of buildings put up by the czars that came to symbolize Soviet power.

The hammer-and-sickle Soviet flag was lowered from the tallest Kremlin building and the red, white and blue Russian flag raised in its place.



Mikhail Gorbachev cleans his resignation speech on the table after delivering it on Soviet television Wednesday.

## Soviets ran out of patience; Gorbachev ran out of time — experts' views

Gorbachev checks his watch as the minutes tick down to his speech. Three minutes before going on the air, he said, "If you have to go, you have to go. It's that time."



Gorbachev will go down in history as a man comparable to the heroes in ancient Greek tragedies. He was a man of vision and courage, who fought bravely and with tactical skill for his goals. But he was bound to lose the fight — The irony of his

defeat is the fact that he has brought about freedom to many nations as well as his own, who had been longing and striving for it for generations.

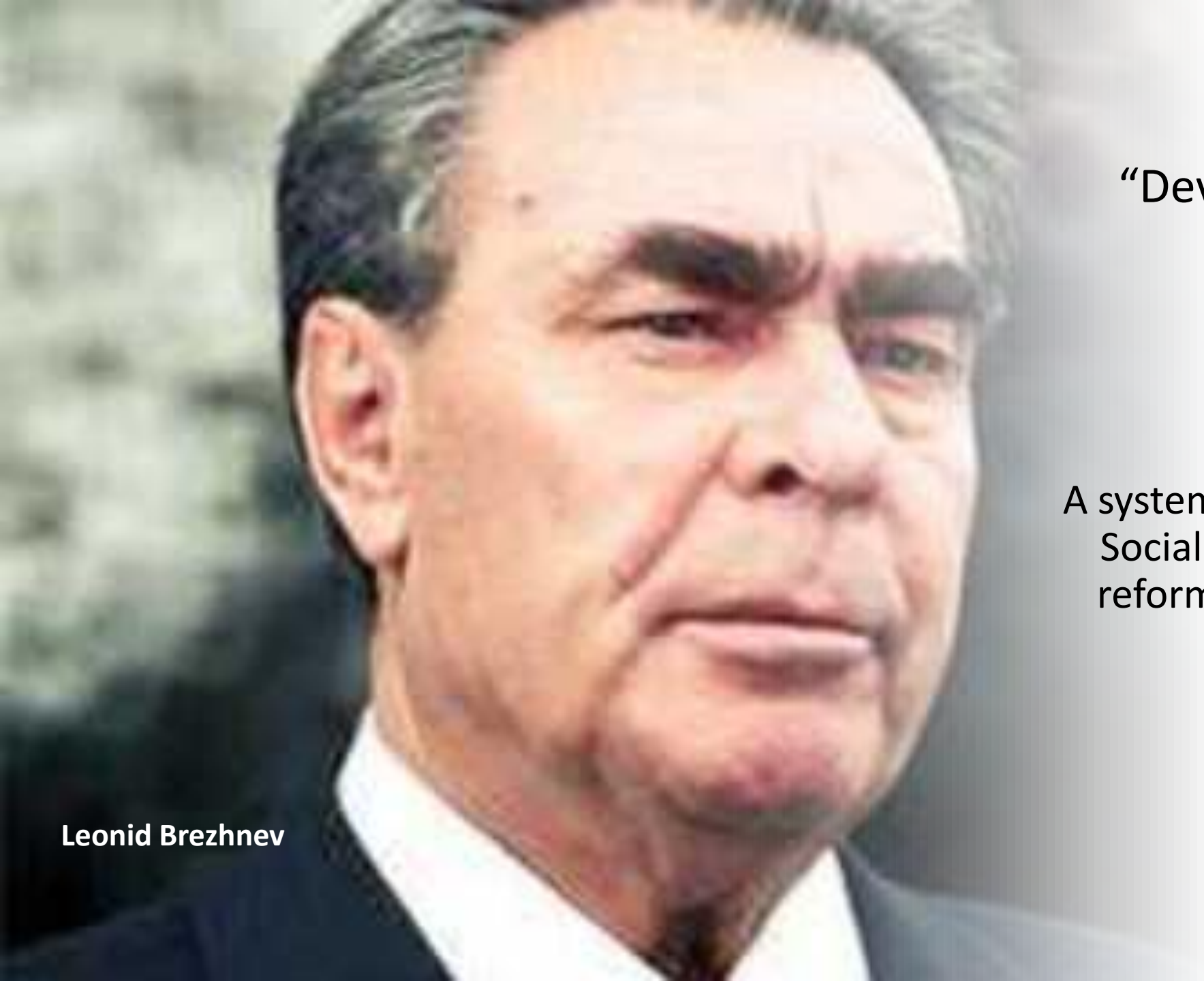
WILLIAM BOWEN  
FORNERS WEEKLY DESIGNER/ILLUSTRATOR

## The fall of the Soviet Union

The result of a complex process  
Multiple causes

The collapse of **both** a socio-economic system ("Developed Socialism") & a federal state

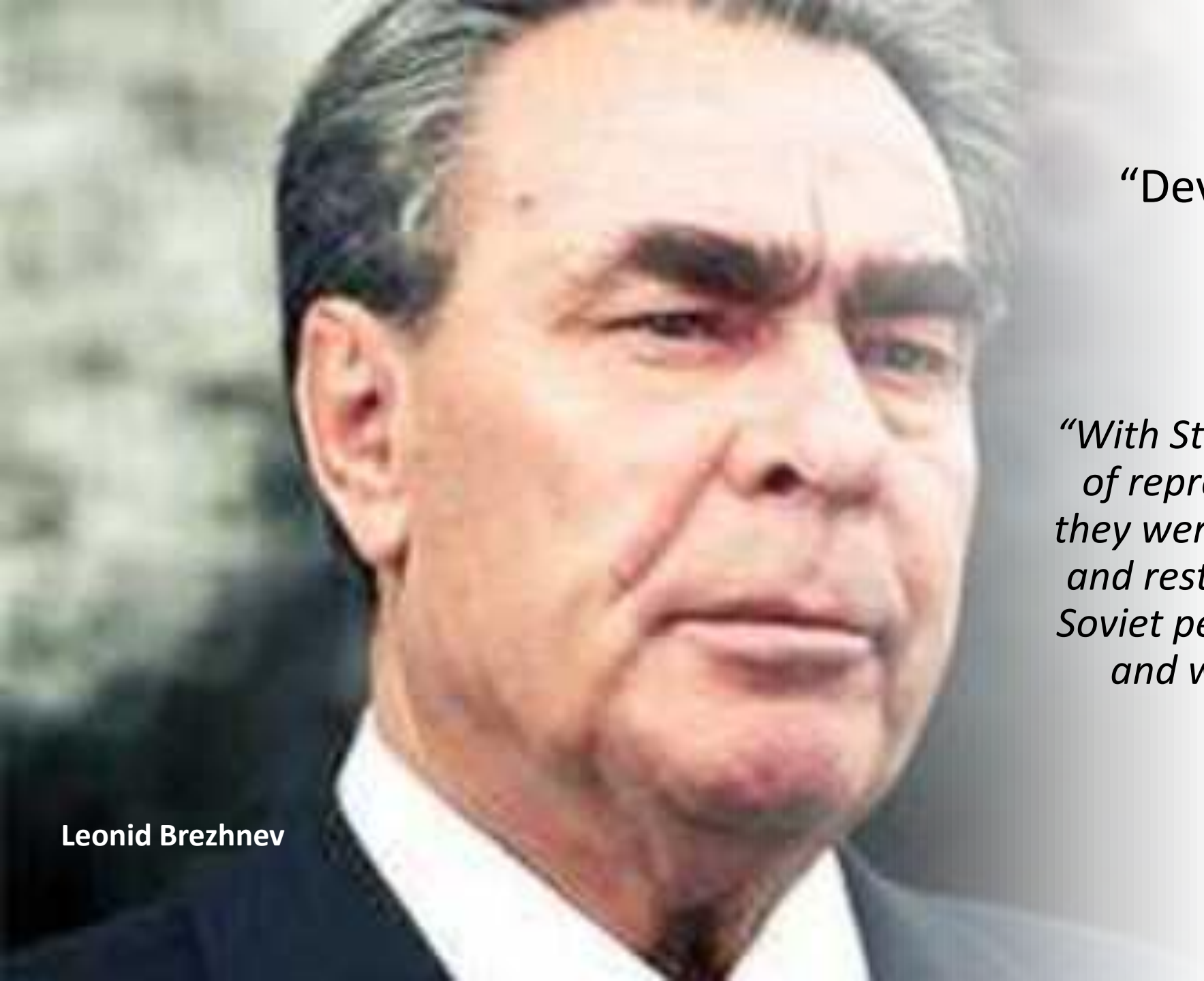




**Leonid Brezhnev**

## “Developed Socialism”

A system not open to reforms: the Socialist model does not need reforms because... it is already developed!



## “Developed Socialism”

*“With Stalin, our people was afraid of repressions, with Khrushchev, they were afraid of reorganizations and restructuration... With us, the Soviet people is finally going to live and work peacefully” (1965)*

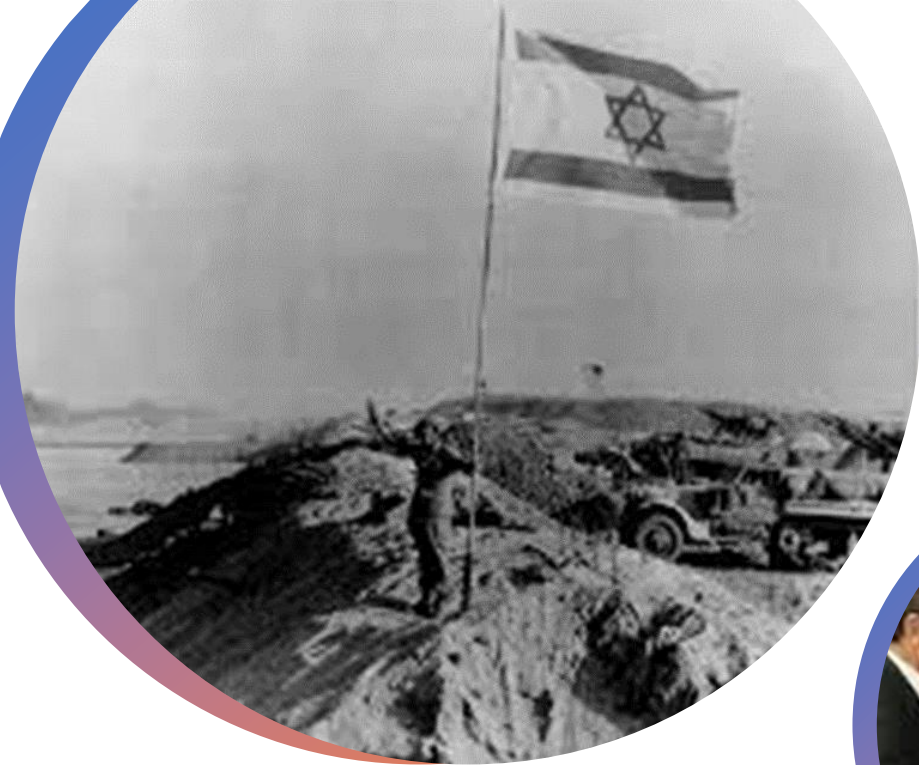
**Leonid Brezhnev**

A portrait of Vladimir Putin, the President of Russia, looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. He is wearing a dark blue suit, a white shirt, and a dark tie with a small white pattern. The background is a solid blue color.

What happened?

A long & complex chain of events  
leading to “*the **greatest geo-political  
catastrophe of the century.***” (Vladimir  
Putin, 2005)





+

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**1970s:** a more fragile  
“superpower” than it seemed...



The illusion of power  
**Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (START):**  
nuclear parity with the U.S.

The **Yom Kippur War** (1973) & the  
spectacular rise of oil prices (Soviet  
Union as a major oil producer)

○



**Conference on Security and Co-  
operation in Europe** (1975): Post WWII  
Europe (Soviet Eastern satellites)  
officially acknowledged by the West



## The **Brezhnev** era (1964-1982) The “*Great Stagnation*”

An aging leadership opposed to reforms

### **1. Economic crisis**

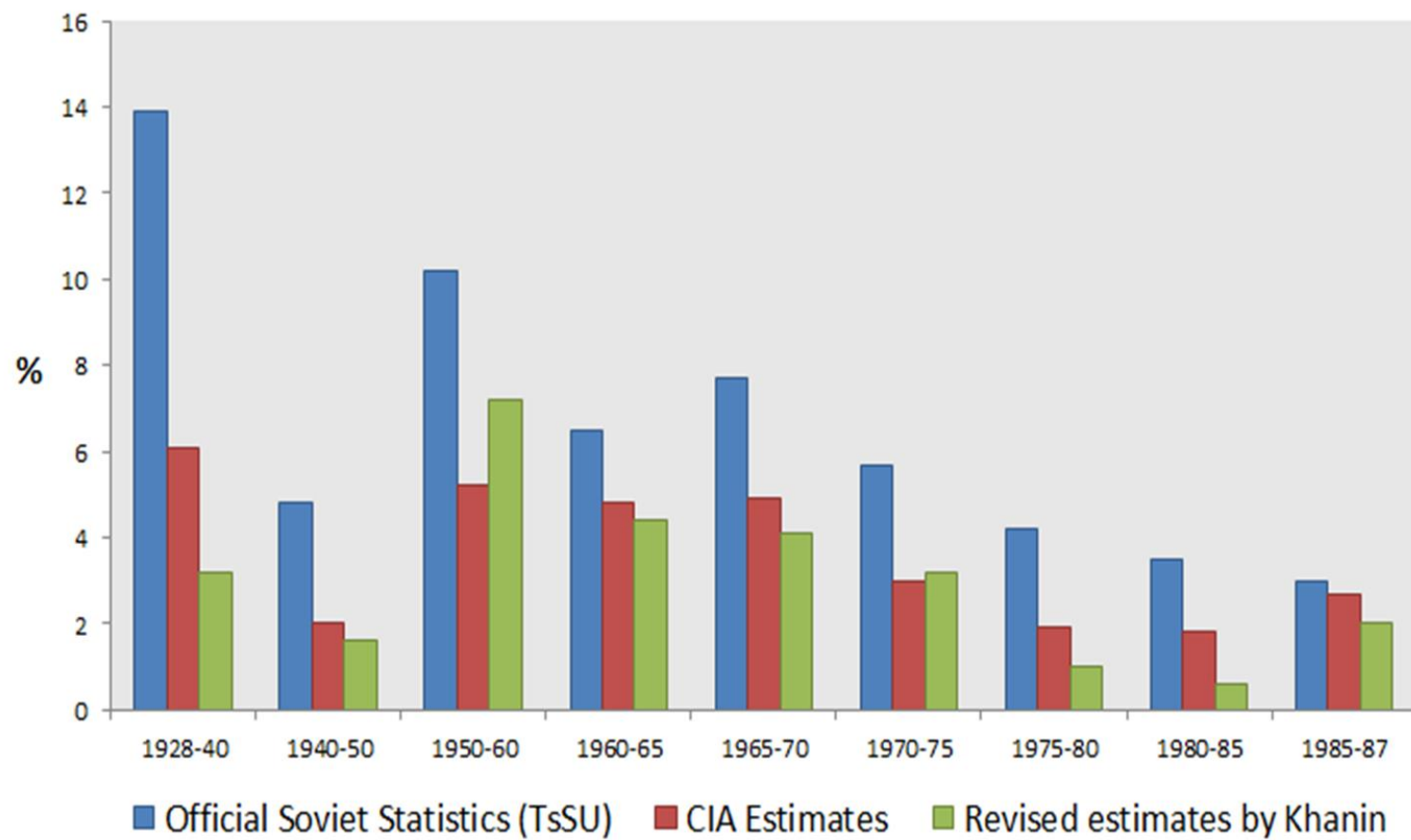
The drastic collapse of economic growth

Loss of productivity

Widespread corruption at the top



### Soviet National Income Growth, 1928-1987



Based on Harrison, M. (1993), "Soviet Economic Growth since 1928: The Alternative Statistics of G. I. Khanin", *Europe-Asia Studies* 45(1), 141-167.



## A Soviet agriculture in crisis

1969-1984: 8 years of disastrous crops imputed to “adverse climate”

The **real causes**:

Collectivization + heavy (inefficient) bureaucracy



## A Soviet agriculture in crisis

The **consequences:**

**Massive imports** of cereals from  
North America

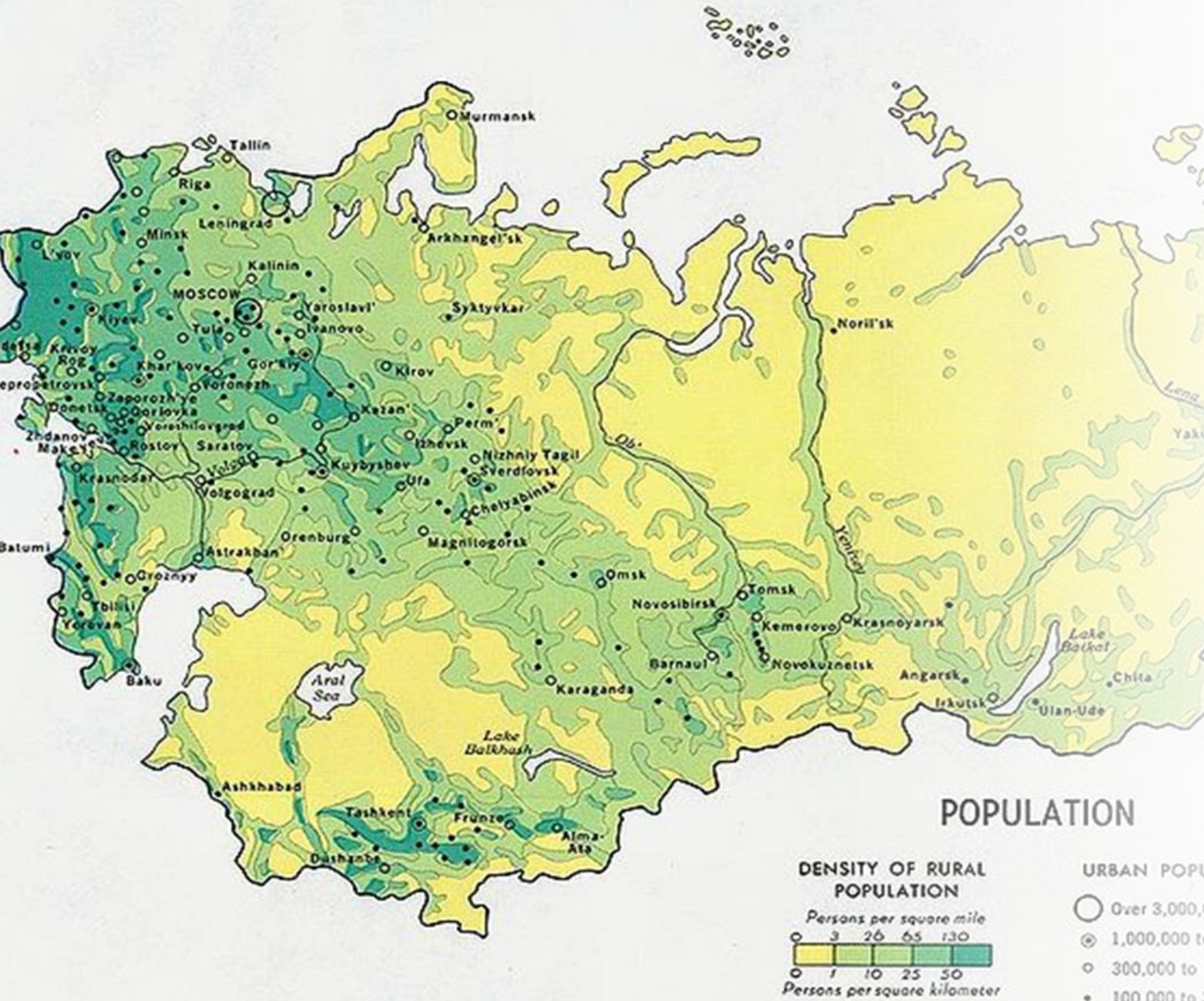
1972-1979: 25 million tons

1979-1984: 40 million tons

**Paid how?**

One-third of Soviet gold reserves





## 2. A demographic crisis

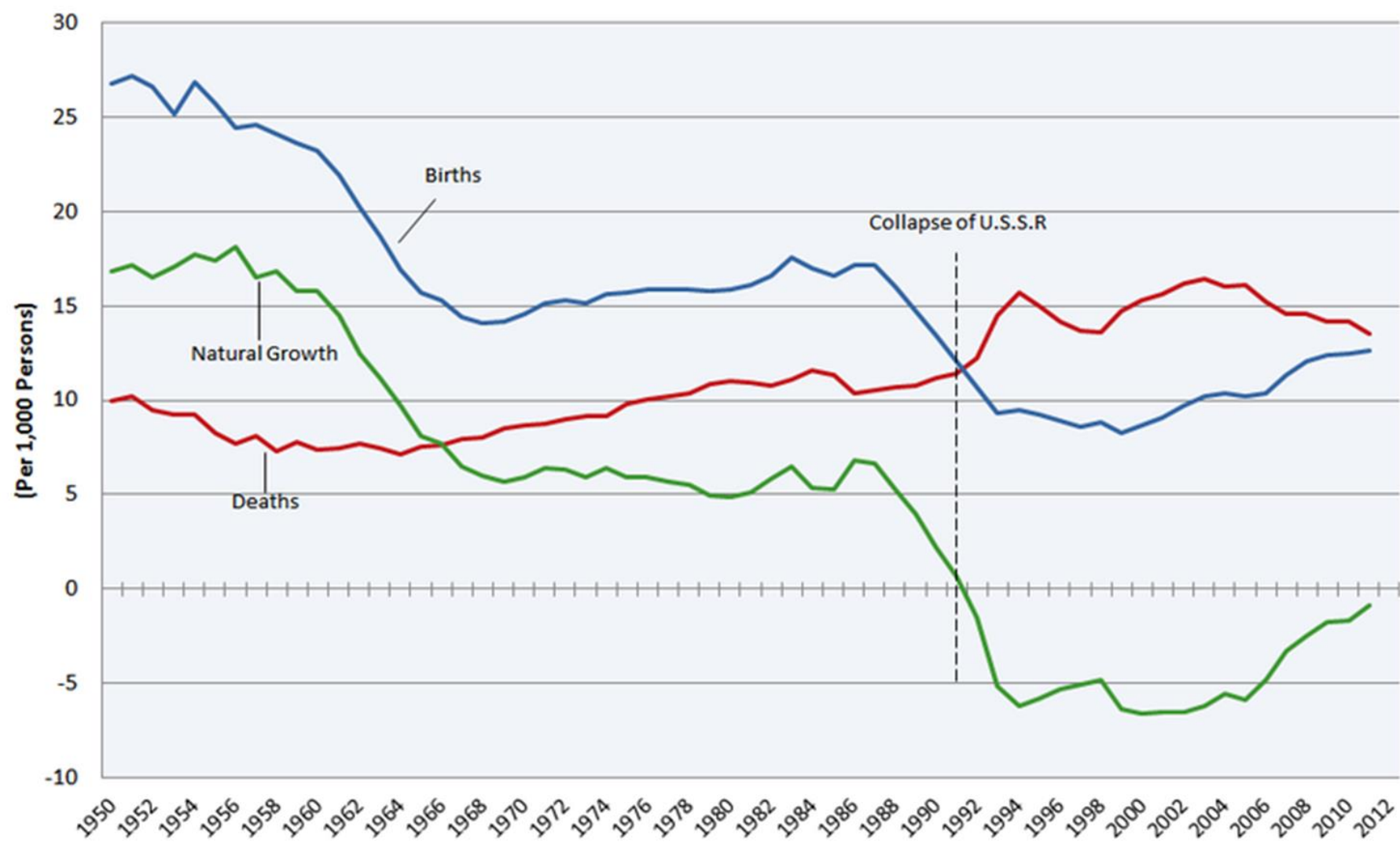
A steep decline of the Soviet population's **life expectancy**

A smaller active population

=

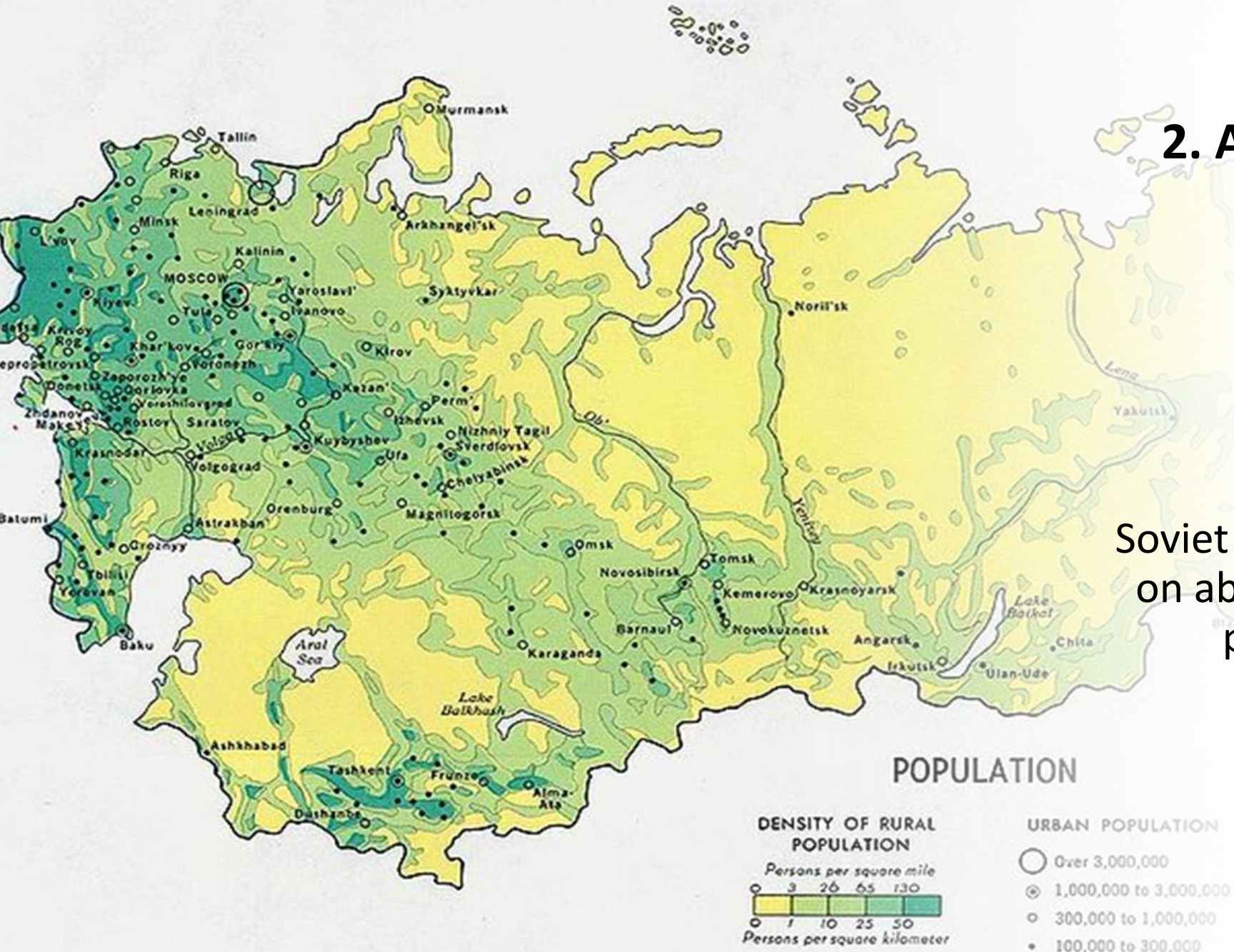
Significant impact on economic growth

## Natural Population Growth of Russia





## 2. A demographic crisis



Soviet Union no longer able to rely on abundant workforce to offset poor economic choices





## The “*Virgin Lands Campaign*” (1954)

From success to disaster...

A titanic project to increase  
**quickly** the production of wheat

Collectivization + WW2

=

Wheat production lower than in  
1913



The not so brilliant idea...

To transform huge areas of uncultivated lands ("*virgin lands*") into wheat producing areas

**300 000** "volunteers" (Communist Youth)

**Spectacular results** in 1956



Подниме

Disaster

Этим землям нет покоя  
Больше год от года  
Брать должны мы  
Хлеба для нас

Some **basic concepts** in  
agriculture:

Newly cleared land requires a system  
of rotation every 2-3 years

Wheat: a difficult crop to grow in  
colder regions

Proper fertilizers & pesticides: a key  
requirement for success

ЦЕЛИНЫ



A photograph of Nikolai Khrushchev, the Soviet Premier, standing in a vast field of golden wheat under a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds. He is wearing a grey suit, a white shirt, and a dark tie. He is looking down at a small plant he is holding in his right hand. The field stretches out to the horizon, and the sky is a deep blue with soft, white clouds.

When the “*Virgin Lands Campaign*” turned into a nightmare of epic proportions

Lack of appropriate machinery

Lack of fertilizers

Climate too dry or too cold

The Soviet Union had to import wheat from... the U.S. (a first!)



Competition with the other  
“superpower”

1980-1988: the Soviet Union under  
pressure

(the Reagan administration)

+

The **Afghan fiasco**: increased  
military spending (unsustainable  
rate)

# COLD WAR

- EASTERN BLOC
- WESTERN BLOC
- IRON CURTAIN



Eastern Europe: a **fractured**  
“Soviet bloc”

Poland (1980-1981):  
martial law





Andrei Sakharov

### 3. A crisis of ideology

1973: *A Letter to the Soviet Leadership*

*“Generalized lying, imposed and mandatory [which is] the most terrible aspect of the life of our country”*

The system unable to adapt to new technologies (global information)



## Nationalism & nationalities re-awakened

The collapse of the Soviet  
federal state: a **dual process**

1. The **peripheries in movement** (Baltic States & Caucasus)



## Nationalism & nationalities re-awakened

The collapse of the Soviet  
federal state: a **dual process**

2. The **implosion** of the centre  
associated with one man's  
political strategy: **Boris Yeltsin**



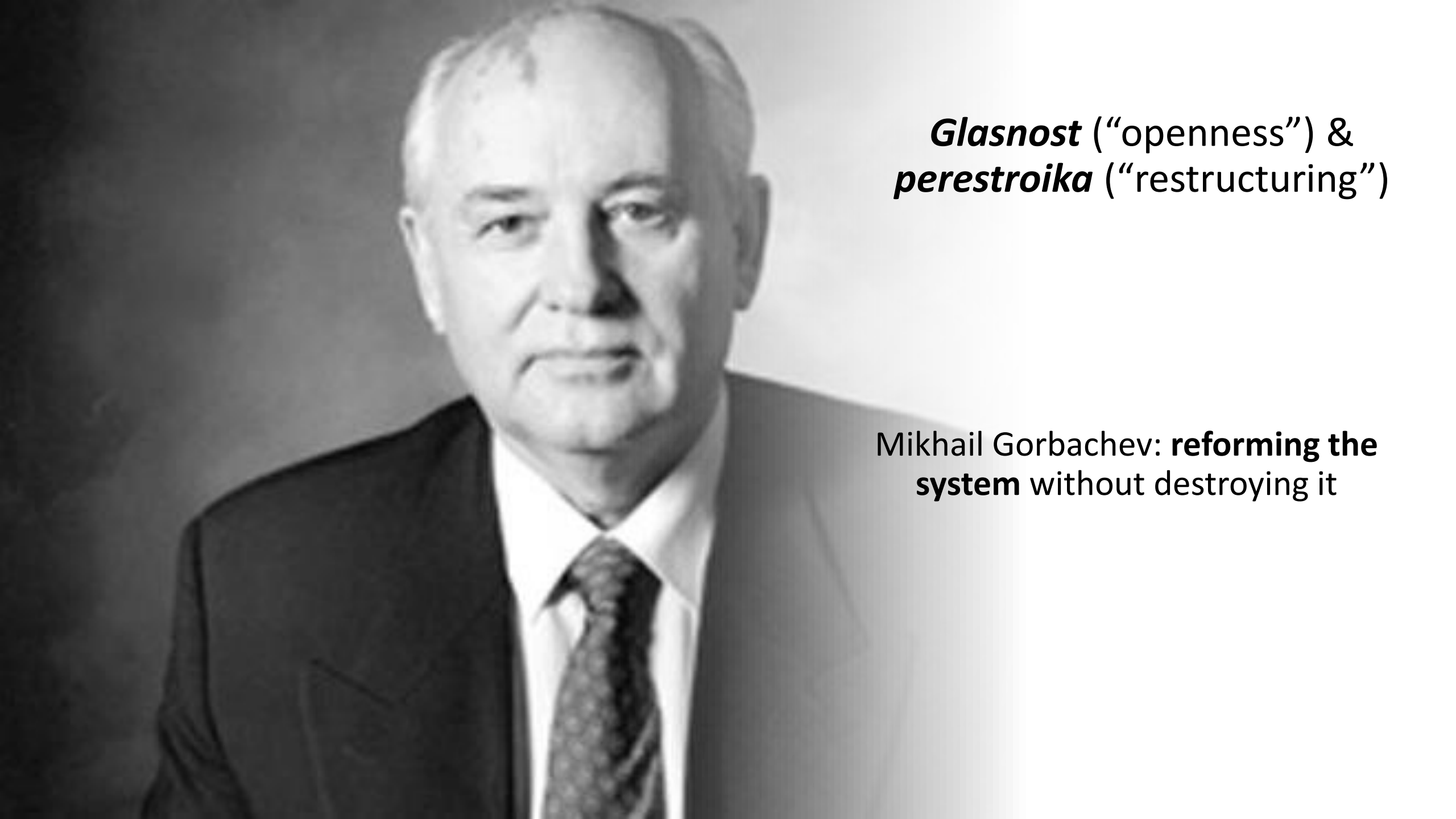


**June 1990**

**Proclaiming Russia's "sovereignty"**

A chain reaction: each Soviet republic encouraged to proclaim its own sovereignty (independence in some cases)

Rise of nationalism with the Soviet federation dismissed by Mikhail Gorbachev

A black and white portrait of Mikhail Gorbachev, showing him from the chest up. He is wearing a dark suit, a white shirt, and a patterned tie. He has short, light-colored hair and is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a soft, out-of-focus gradient.

***Glasnost*** (“openness”) &  
***perestroika*** (“restructuring”)

Mikhail Gorbachev: **reforming the system** without destroying it



## The Baltic States: the pioneers

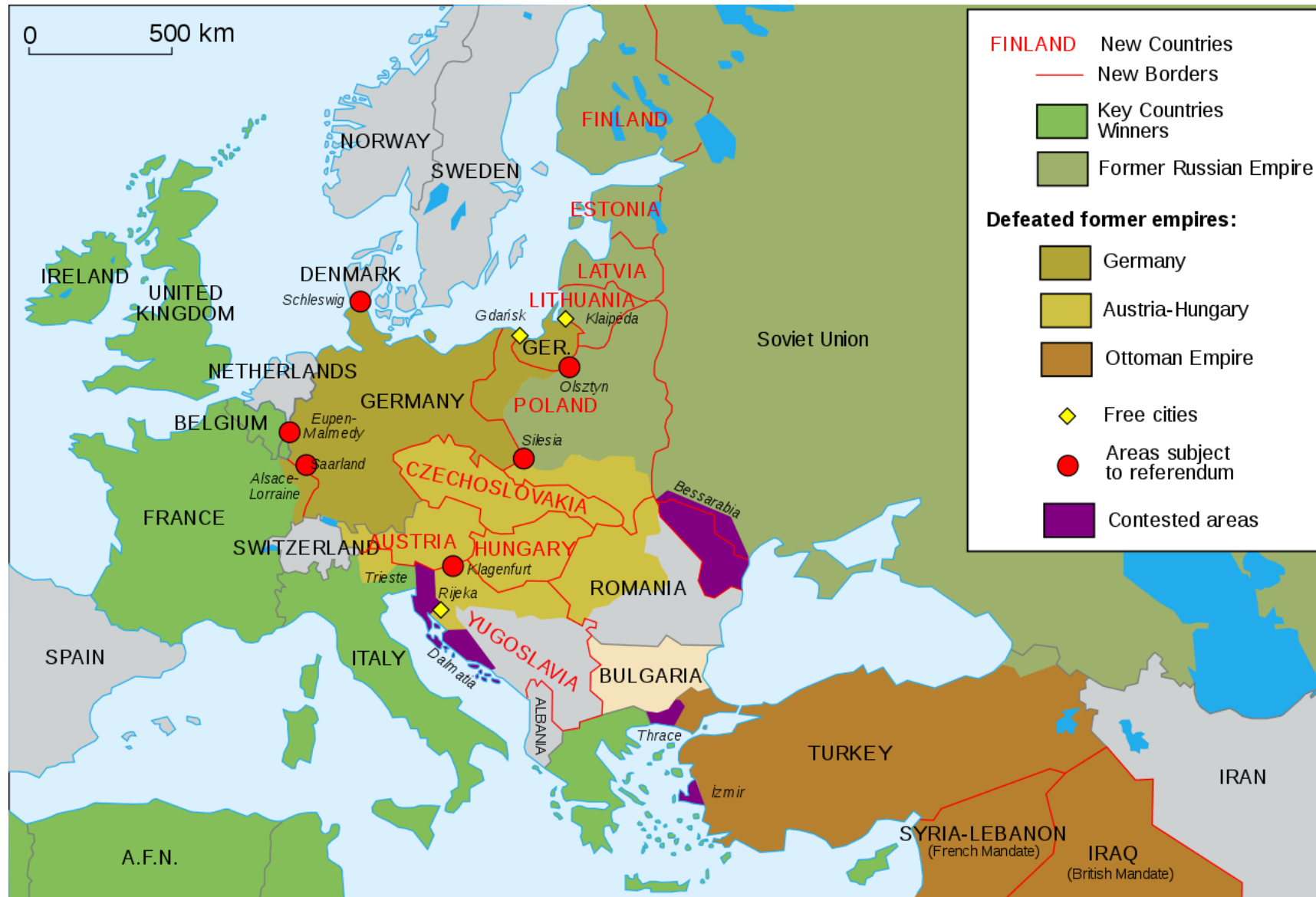
Incorporated against their will to the Soviet Union in 1940





## 1919: a strategy of containment

Paris Peace Conference: the erection of a "*cordon sanitaire*" (bulwark) – A ring of anti-communist states to isolate Bolshevik Russia





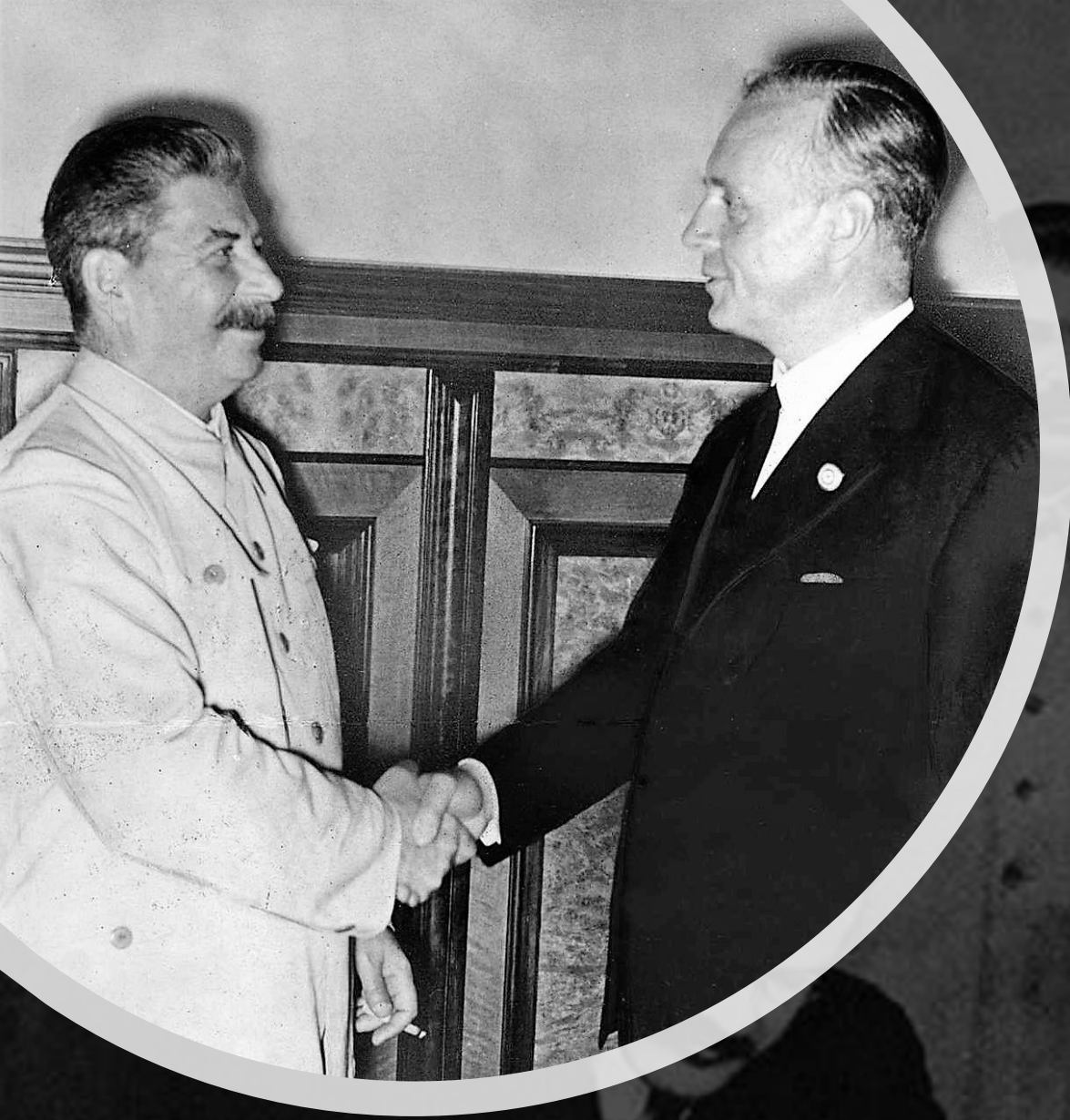
# Interwar Europe

A security nightmare for Soviet military experts

The proximity of hostile states (Poland, **Baltic States**, Finland) to prevent the spread of communism in Europe







## Non-Aggression Pact (23 August 1939)

**Publicly-announced stipulations:**  
Germany and Soviet Union not to wage war on one another

A secret protocol: agreement on  
“spheres of influence” in Eastern Europe



## Planned division of Central Europe according to Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact



- Soviet Union
- Germany
- Other countries and territories
- EP East Prussia

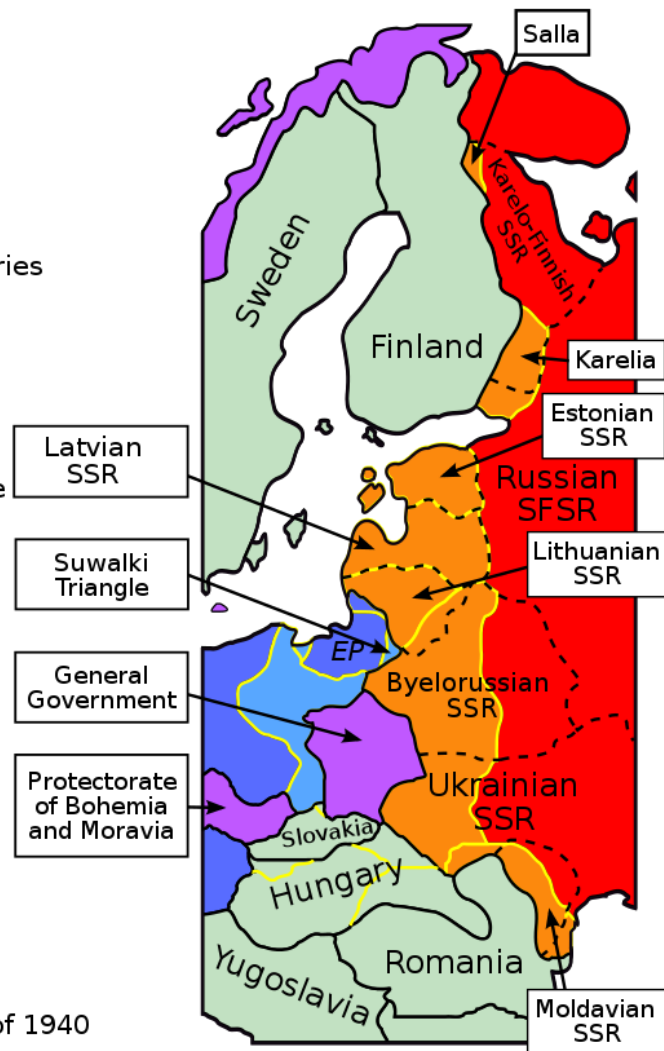
**1939** ◀◀

- Soviet sphere of influence
- German sphere of influence
- National borders as of 1939
- Planned Borders
- Soviet republic borders as of 1939

**1940** ▶▶

- Annexed by the Soviet Union
- Annexed by Germany
- Occupied by Germany
- National borders as of 1940
- National borders as of 1938
- Soviet republic borders as of 1940

## Actual territorial changes 1939-1940





## The Baltic States: the pioneers

The emergence of numerous “informal groups” (1986-1987)

**“National Fronts”**: massive street demonstrations on **August 23**





A 2 million people “human chain”  
holding hands across Lithuania, Latvia &  
Estonia

**23 August 1989 (50<sup>th</sup> anniversary)**

**Free elections (March 1989): the  
victory of “Popular Fronts”**





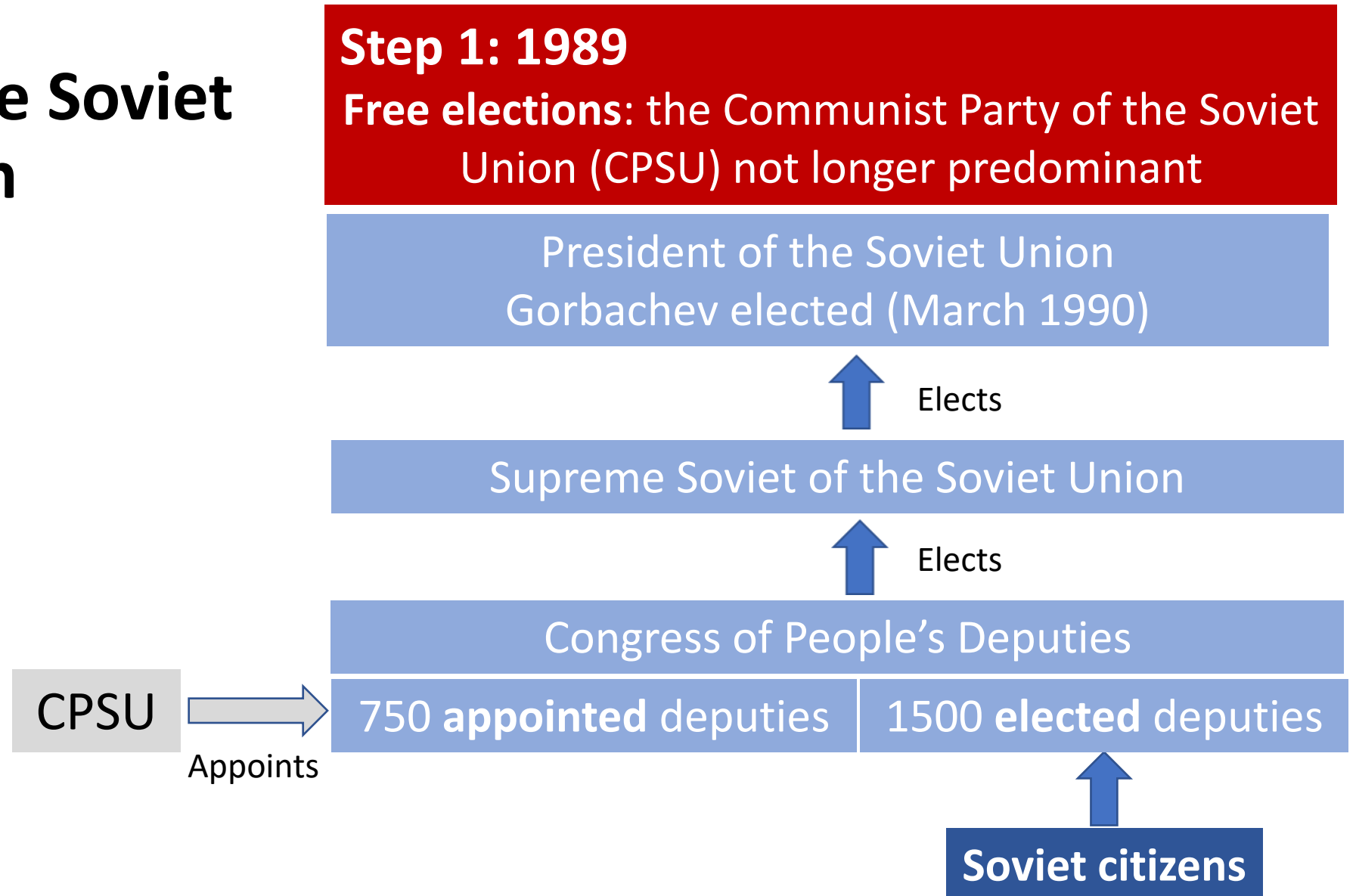
**June 1988**

Gorbachev abolished the  
**Central Committee of the  
Communist Party**

(The body that control all party  
and government activities)

Elections to be held in 1989  
**(Congress of People's Deputies)**

# The end of the Soviet system







Gorbachev's speech at  
the UN  
(December 1988)

**Freedom of choice**

Message to Soviet bloc in  
Eastern Europe: it is possible to  
leave

Soviet government to respect  
*"universal values"*



**September 1989:** Hungary opened its border with Austria



## Lithuania

The first Baltic State to proclaim its **independence** (March 1990)

Estonia and Latvia followed (*“period of transition towards independence”*)





## The Soviet republics of the Caucasus

Slower process towards independence (inter-ethnic tensions)



## Central Asian republics

Artificial Soviet political entities

**Lack of ethnic homogeneity**

**Kazakhstan:** half of population  
Ukrainian & Russian (Stalin's mass  
deportations)

**March 1990 elections:** large  
majority for the communists





**April 1986:** the Chernobyl disaster

## **Ukrainian Democratic Movement**

The future of Ukraine within the Soviet Union in question

Ukraine overexploited by the Soviet system (the “nuclear trash can” of the Soviet Union?)





## Massive demonstrations

Eastern Ukraine (Donbass region):  
miners' strike (summer 1989)



March 1989 elections: victory for  
Ukrainian nationalists (led by **Leonid  
Kravchuk**)



**Close ties** with Boris Yeltsin

Leonid Kravchuk & Boris Yeltsin:  
a **capital role** in the final crisis of  
the Soviet Union



## Boris Yeltsin

**Promoted** by Gorbachev in December 1985  
as head of the Moscow Communist Party  
(regional section)

Pro-reforms from the start

Opposition to Gorbachev: reforms too slow!  
*"Apart from Glasnost and criticism, we have  
achieved nothing. We have nothing to show  
for"*

Fired by Gorbachev





The March 1989 elections

**First free elections** in the Soviet Union (multiple candidates)

Yeltsin triumphantly elected deputy of Moscow (90% of the votes)

The creation of an “interregional Group” (300 pro-reforms deputies)



**29 May 1990**

**Yeltsin elected president of the Federation of Russia (by the deputies)**

Russia's "**declaration of sovereignty**" presented to Gorbachev (president of the Soviet Union)

**July 1990:** Yeltsin left the CPUS

A map of the Soviet Union showing its constituent republics. Most of the territory is colored red. Several republics in the western part of the country are highlighted in orange, including the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. A few republics, such as Chechnya, Dagestan, and Abkhazia, are highlighted in black. The map also shows the surrounding seas and the borders of neighboring countries.

## A New Union Treaty (23 November 1990)

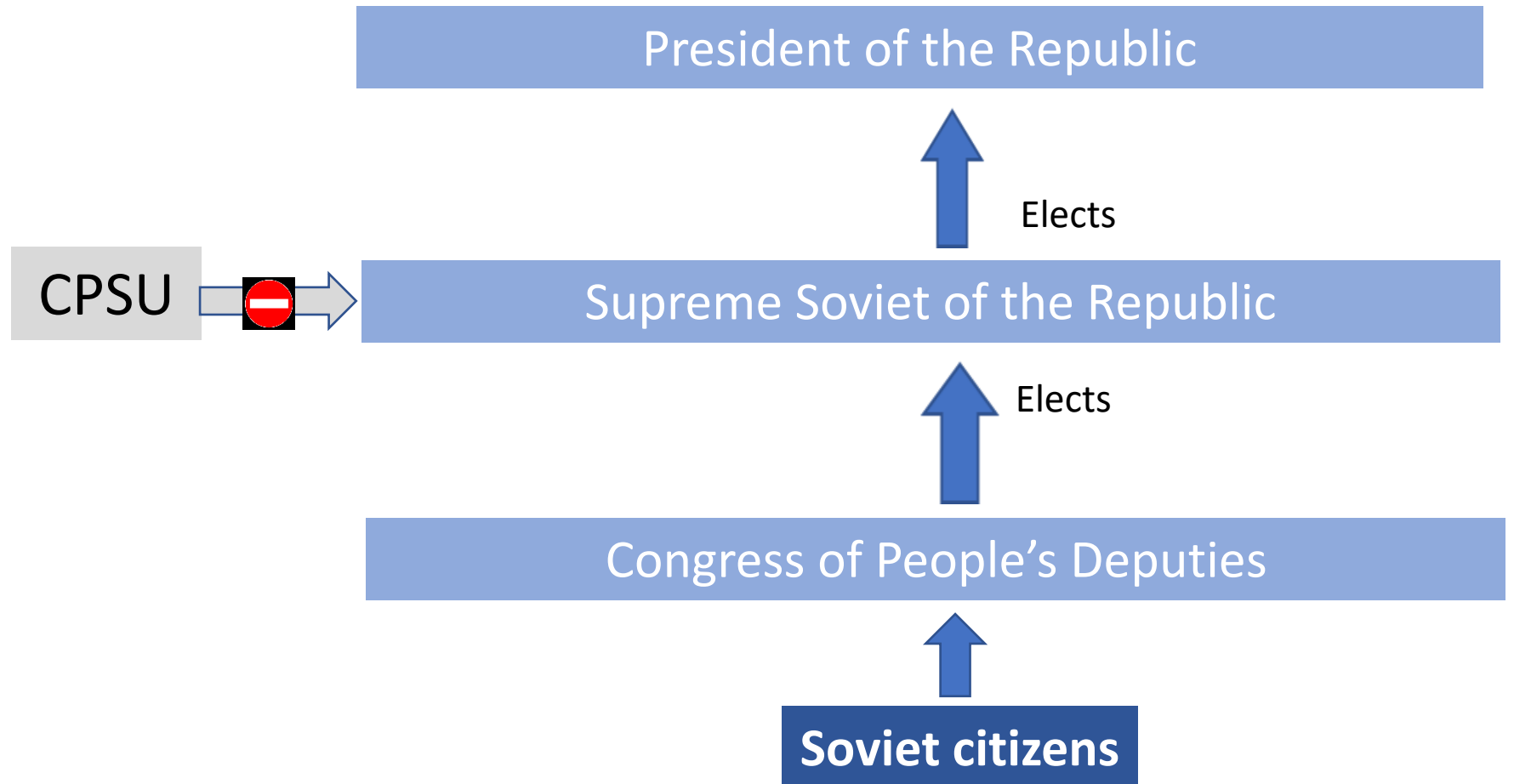
The Soviet Union to become a  
**federation** of independent republics  
(common president, foreign policy &  
military)



# The end of the Soviet system

## Step 2: 1990

Reform applied in each Soviet republic





**20 November 1990**

Leonid Kravchuk & Boris Yeltsin:  
**Bilateral agreement** mutually  
acknowledging the sovereignty  
of Russia and Ukraine

Economic cooperation

Similar agreement signed with  
Kazakhstan



Growing opposition  
Gorbachev-Yeltsin

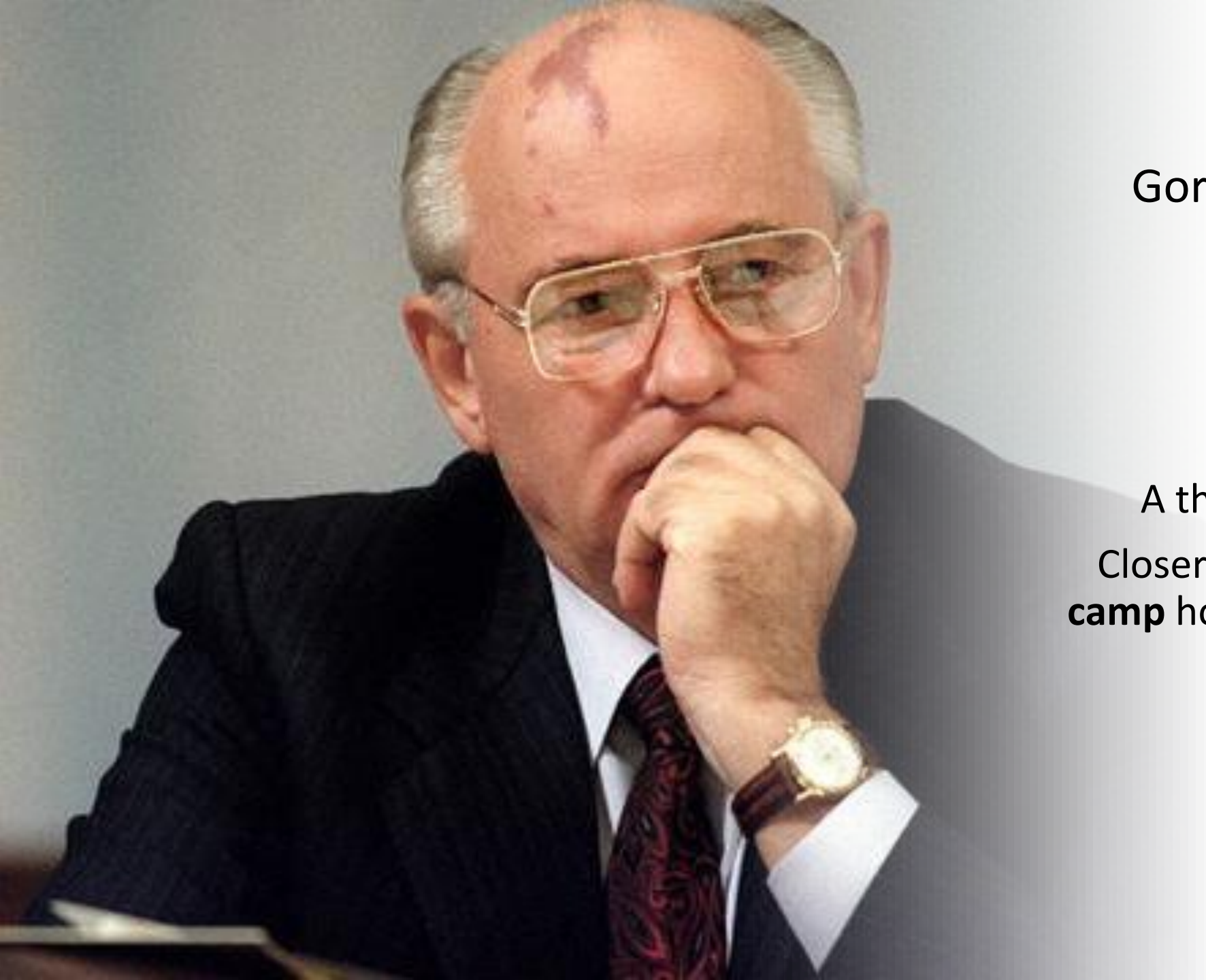
Numerous disagreements

**What economic reforms?**

Yeltsin's "500 day plan": a quick  
transition to market economy

Gorbachev: a slow transition





Gorbachev's reaction

A threat to his authority

Closer ties with **conservative camp** hostile to political reforms



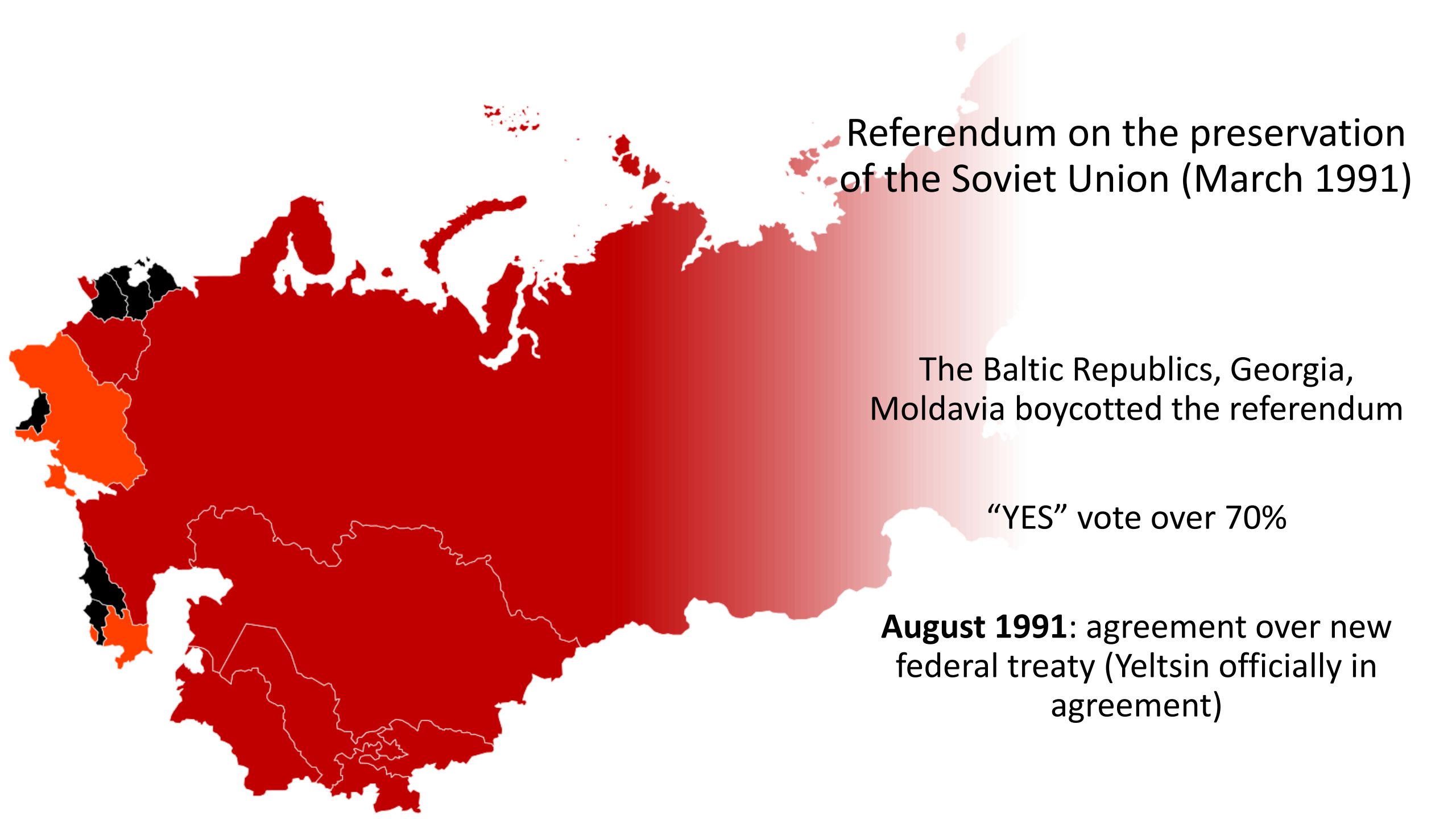
**13 January 1991**

Soviet assault of parliament building  
in Vilnius (Lithuania) to stop  
independence process

Yeltsin firmly condemned

Movement towards independence  
(Latvia & Estonia) accelerated

Georgia proclaimed its independence

A map of the Soviet Union with its constituent republics outlined. The map is color-coded to show the results of the March 1991 referendum on the preservation of the Soviet Union. Most of the territory is colored dark red, indicating a 'YES' vote of over 70%. A large, semi-transparent light red rectangular area covers the eastern part of the map, including Siberia and the Far East. In the western part of the map, several republics are colored orange, representing the Baltic Republics (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) and Georgia. A few small republics in the northwest (Belarus, Ukraine) and the Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia) are colored black, indicating they boycotted the referendum.

## Referendum on the preservation of the Soviet Union (March 1991)

The Baltic Republics, Georgia,  
Moldavia boycotted the referendum

“YES” vote over 70%

**August 1991:** agreement over new  
federal treaty (Yeltsin officially in  
agreement)



A map of Russia with its administrative regions outlined. Most regions are colored red. A large area in the northwest, including parts of the Far North and the Baltic states, is colored orange. Several small regions in the Far North and the Caucasus are colored black. The text is overlaid on the right side of the map.

## More disagreements

3 months of negotiations:  
“federation” vs. “confederation”

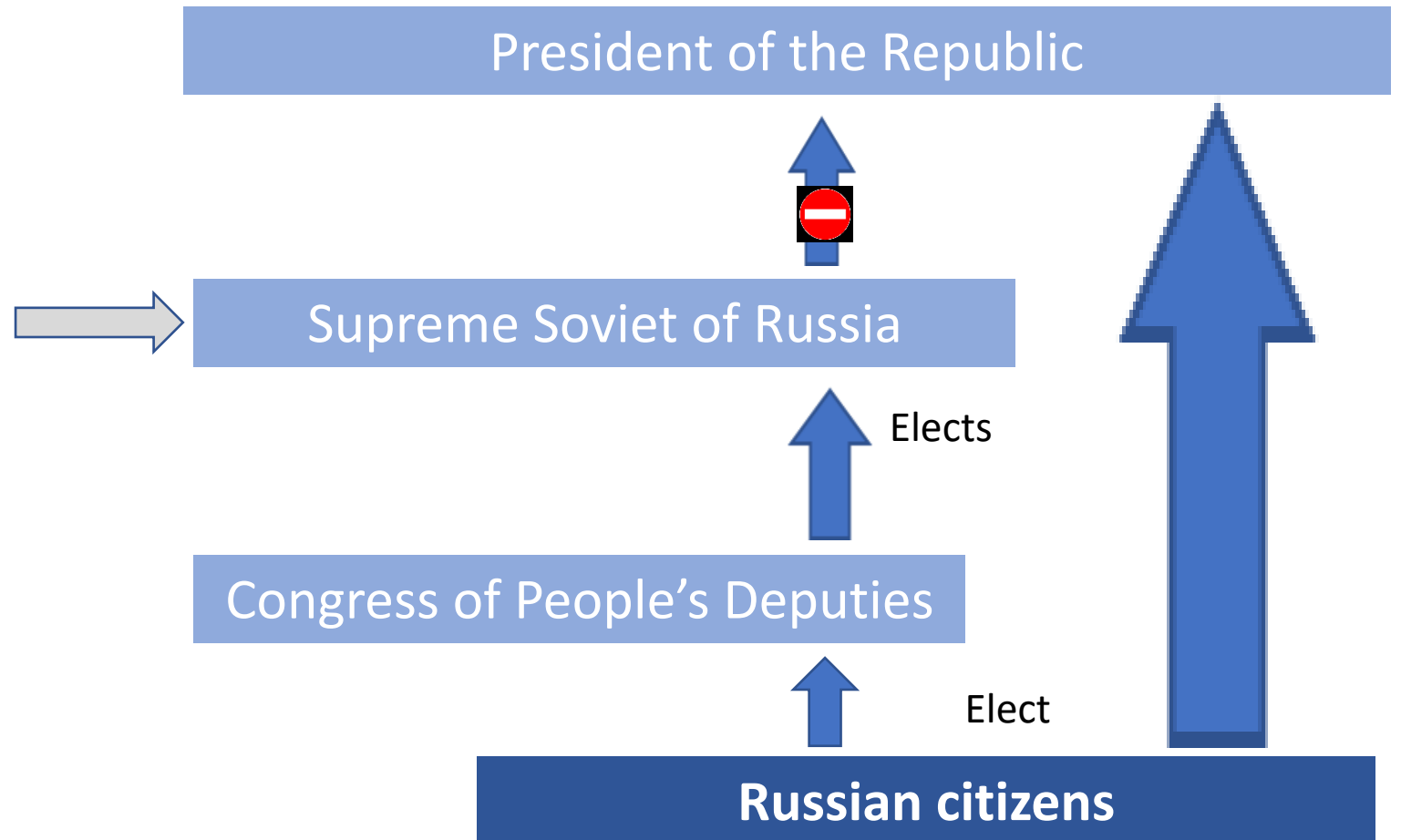
Yeltsin’s decision **to accelerate** the  
process of disintegration of the Union

**12 June 1991:** Yeltsin won 57% of the  
popular vote (Russian presidential  
elections)

# The end of the Soviet system

**Step 3: 1991**

**Yeltsin's act of political force**





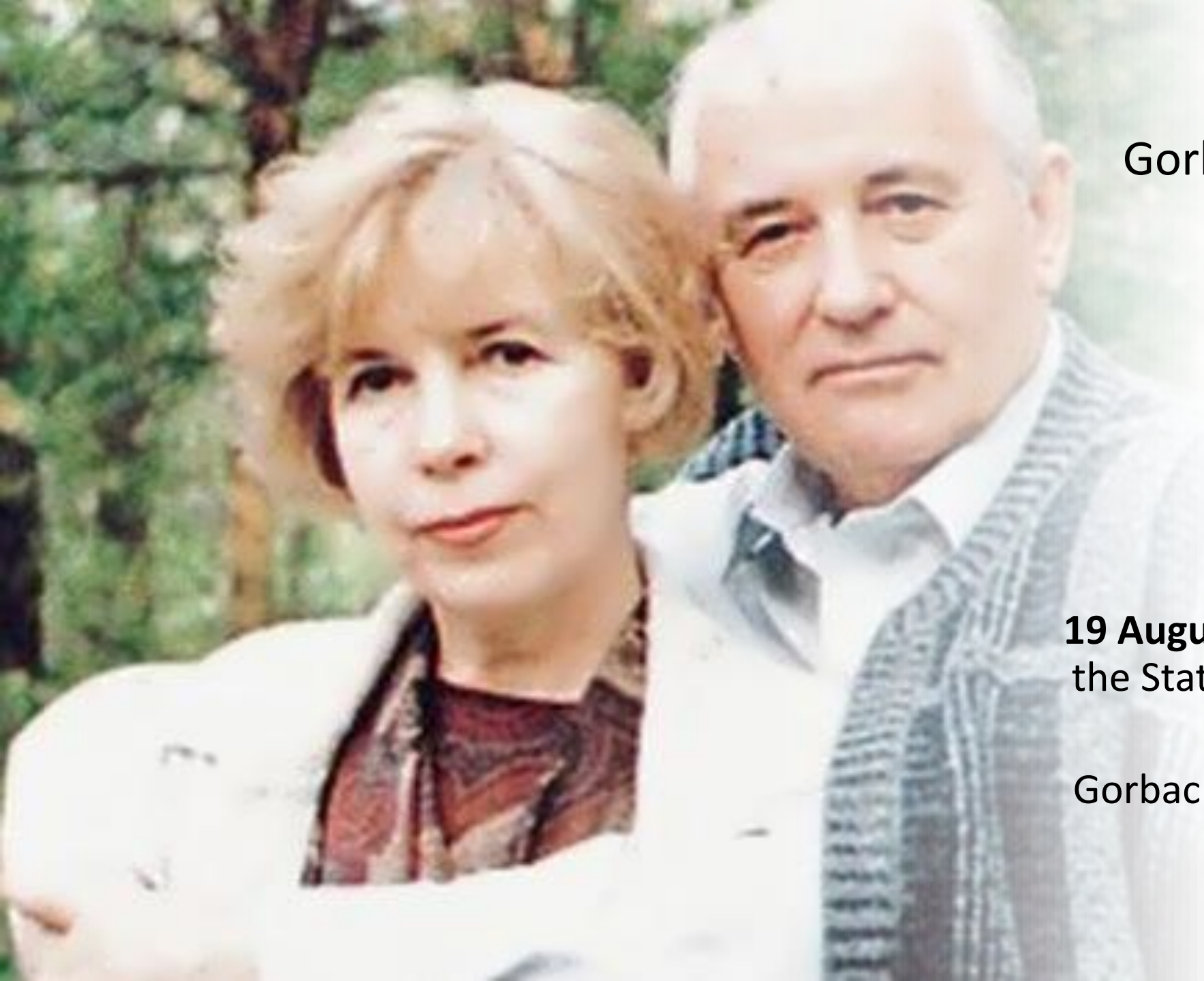
## A question of **political legitimacy**

Gorbachev elected (indirect suffrage)

Yeltsin's growing political clout

Conservative elements within government: a reaction before it is too late (19-21 August 1991)





Gorbachev & family in  
house arrest

Complete isolation

**19 August:** the State Committee for  
the State of Emergency officially in  
power

Gorbachev no longer president for  
*“health reasons”*

## The “State Committee on the State of Emergency”

The “Gang of Eight”: a group of 8 high-ranking Soviet officials (Soviet government, CPSU and KGB)

Gorbachev “invited” to sign the decree proclaiming the state of emergency and confirming the creation of the Committee

*“Go to hell! I have nothing to say to you”*





Meanwhile near Moscow...

**Boris Yeltsin** (President of the Russian Federation) awakened at 6am

Radio announcement: Gorbachev replaced by **Gennady Yanayev** (Vice President of the Soviet Union)

State of emergency to last 6 months





Military deployment in  
Moscow

To intimidate the population



Meanwhile at the  
Kremlin...

Meeting of the “Gang of Eight” (10am)

Military forces in alert

The next step: a meeting of the Soviet  
Supreme to confirm decisions of the  
State Committee

A peaceful transition?





## **A letter from “President” Gennady Yanayev**

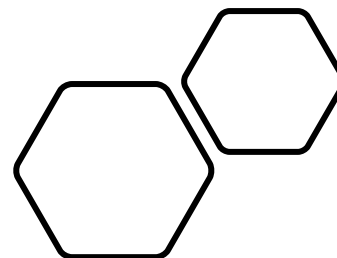
To reassure world leaders  
The State Committee to continue  
reforms

Russia’s “international commitments”  
to be respected





# CRISIS IN MOSCOW





A press conference

The New Union Treaty *“anti- constitutional”*

The conspirators: total lack of charisma

The image of a group of mediocre  
conspirators

Rumors and **disinformation**: Gorbachev  
behind the coup?



The “White House”

The heart of resistance

Reading the *Call to the Citizens of Russia*

What will the Army do? What will the KGB do?

How long can Yeltsin resist?



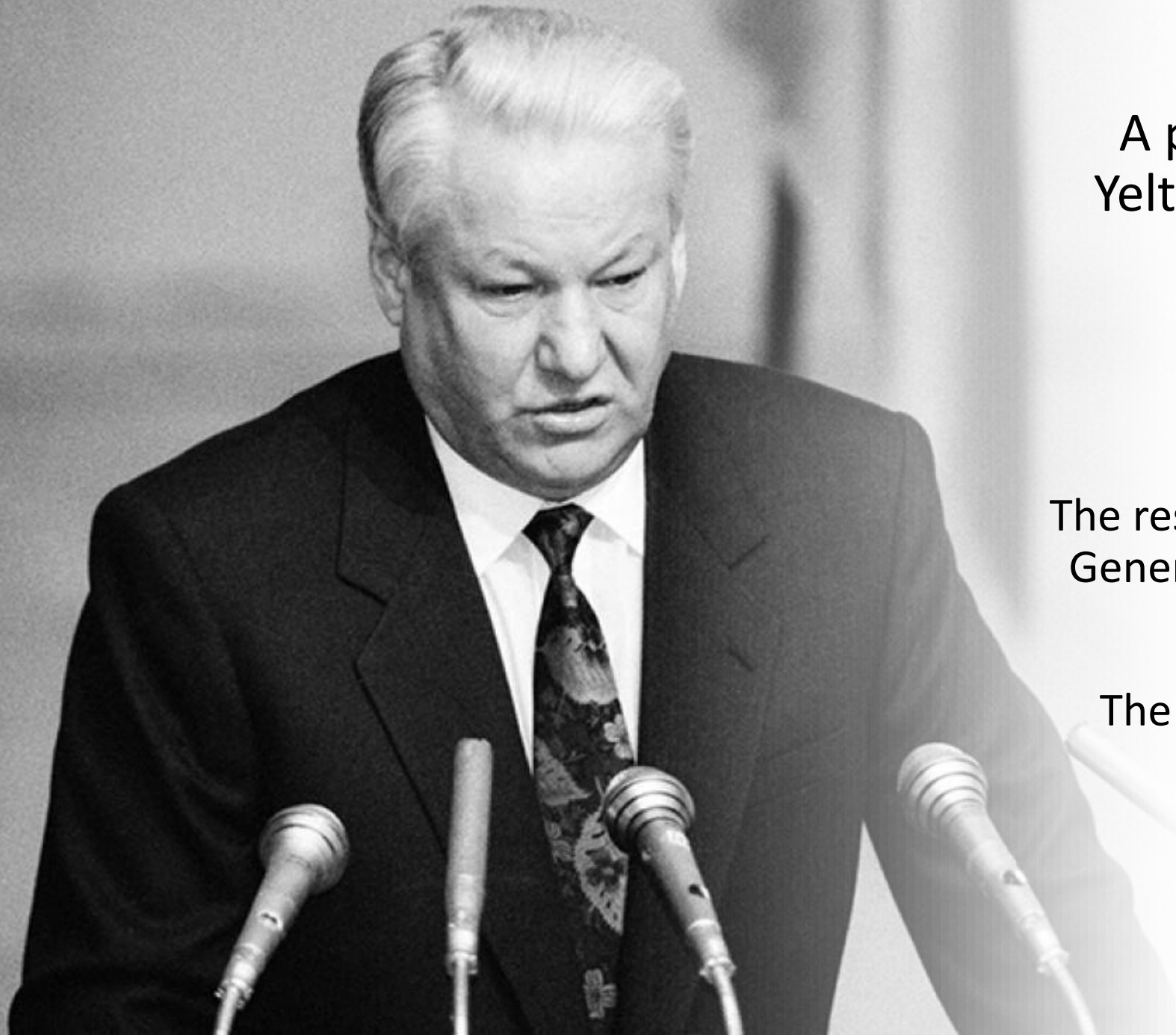






The return of Gorbachev

The Gang of Eight indicted



A political victory for  
Yeltsin over Gorbachev

The resignation of Gorbachev as  
General Secretary of the CPUS

The CPUS banned in Russia





## The independence of Ukraine

Proclaimed by Ukrainian  
parliament (1 December)

90% voted "YES"



## The Belovezh Accords (8 December 1991)

**Declaration** adopted by Boris Yeltsin (Russia), Leonid Kravchuk (Ukraine) & Stanislav Shushkevich (Belarus): the Soviet Union ceased to exist

The creation of a **Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)**: loose intergovernmental organization





## The **Alma-Ata Protocol** (21 December 1991)

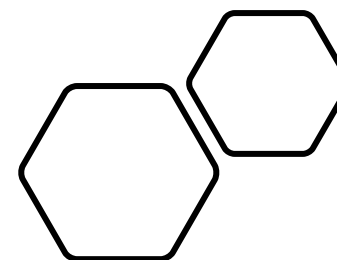
Founding declarations and principles  
of the CIS adopted by 11 of the 15  
former Soviet republics (except  
Baltic States & Georgia)

Gorbachev not invited



A black and white photograph showing two men, Boris Yeltsin on the left and Mikhail Gorbachev on the right, seated at a long table during a formal meeting. Both men are wearing dark suits and have their hands resting on their chins in a contemplative pose. In front of them are several microphones and papers. The background is slightly out of focus, showing draped curtains and structural elements of the room.

**23 December:** meeting Yeltsin-Gorbachev  
to finalize the end of the Soviet Union



A portrait of Leonid Brezhnev, a Soviet leader, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and dark tie. He is wearing glasses and has a serious expression. The background is a light-colored wall with a red curtain visible on the left side.

**A peaceful transition of power**

The end of an experiment  
triggered in violence 74 years  
prior (October 1917)

A failed transition to democracy



February 2014 annexation of  
Crimea



**RUSSIA**

**UKRAINE**

KIEV

LUHANSK

DONETSK

CRIMEA  
PENINSULA

BLACK  
SEA



## The annexation of Crimea: the violation of 3 international agreements

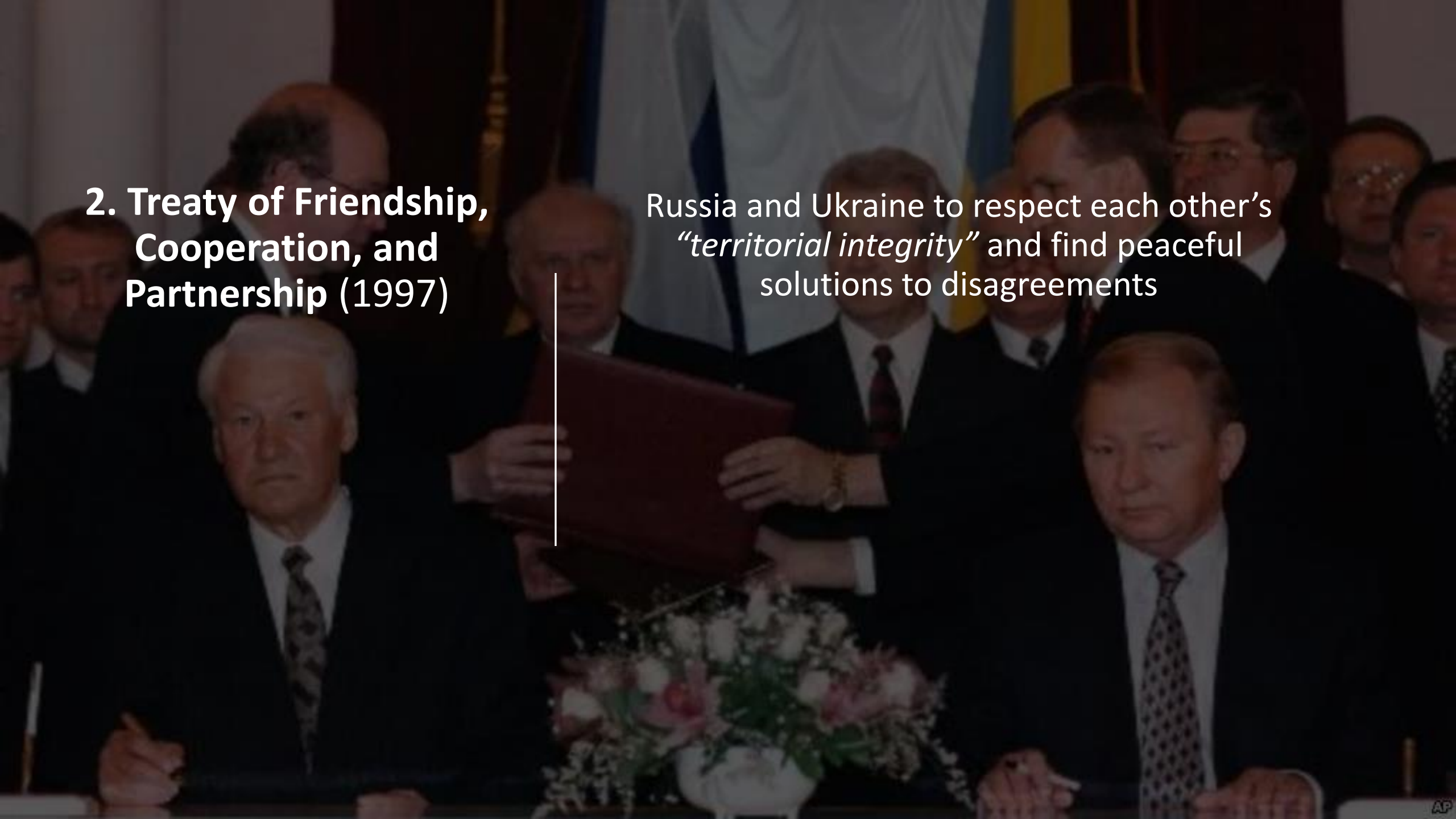
### 1. The Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances (1994)

Ukraine agreed to give up its nuclear weapons with Russia agreeing to *“respect Ukrainian independence and sovereignty in the existing borders”*



## 2. Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership (1997)

Russia and Ukraine to respect each other's  
*"territorial integrity"* and find peaceful  
solutions to disagreements





# Treaty between Russia & Ukraine (2003)

## On Cooperation in the Use of the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait

Joint management

Free navigation

Putin's recognition of Crimea as part of  
Ukraine

**24 February 2022:** Russia's invasion of  
Ukraine

