

## The 1991 coup d'état

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## The 1991 coup d'état

On 19 August 1991, on the eve of the signing of the Union Treaty by Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, but before the six other republics in favour of reforming the Union had declared their support, a coup d'état took place in Moscow, launched by a group of conservatives who could not accept the risk that the USSR might break up. They decided to depose Gorbachev, who was on holiday in the Crimea at the time, replace him as Head of State by the Vice-President Gennady Yanayev, declare a state of emergency and restore censorship. Boris Yeltsin, who had been elected President of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR by universal suffrage on 12 June 1991 with a large majority (53.7 % of the vote), thwarted the coup. He called for a general strike, rallying troops and leading demonstrations against the coup leaders. The latter were swiftly arrested.

Gorbachev returned to Moscow on 27 August after the failure of the coup d'état, but he did not regain his position of power. From then on it was Yeltsin who held all the cards. In June 1991 he had convinced the Russian Supreme Soviet to adopt a text proclaiming the superiority of Russian law over Soviet law. On 12 June 1991, the day he was elected President of Russia, Yeltsin declared the sovereignty of Russia and resigned from the Communist Party. The party was forbidden in the army and state bodies, and he later had it suspended. Gorbachev resigned as General Secretary of the Communist Party. The RSFSR, a pillar of the USSR, distanced itself from the authority of the Kremlin.

Encouraged by the failure of the coup, the Congress of Deputies of the USSR granted substantial powers to the republics, the 'centre' only retaining control over foreign and defence policy. But the republics were increasingly reluctant to accept any limitation on their sovereignty. Central government having lost its authority, demands for independence were heard on all sides, rendering the ultimate break-up of the USSR inevitable.

Lithuania was the first SSR to declare its independence on 11 March 1991. Estonia and Latvia followed suit on 20 and 21 August respectively, during the attempted coup in Moscow. In the Caucasus, Georgia was the first to declare independence on 9 April 1991, followed by Azerbaijan on 30 August 1991 and Armenia on 23 September 1991. One after another the federal entities of the Soviet Union declared independence: Ukraine on 24 August 1991, Belarus on 25 August, Moldova on 27 August, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan on 31 August, Tajikistan on 9 September, Turkmenistan on 27 October and finally Kazakhstan on 16 December. Secession by Ukraine on 1 December 1991 and its refusal to sign the Union Treaty signalled the ultimate demise of the Soviet Union.