

# Position and Speech of George Bush Sr. in Kyiv on August 1, 1991 concerning Ukraine and the USSR



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## Abstract

The article is devoted to the political and legal analysis of the speech delivered by U.S. President George H. W. Bush in the Verkhovna Rada of the Ukrainian SSR on August 1, 1991; in the media it is known as the “Chicken Kiev” speech. The purpose of the study is to clarify the political context of the summer of 1991, to reconstruct the content of the speech and to assess its perception and historical consequences from the perspective of contemporary understanding. The author relies on official transcripts, scientific publications and his own observations as a people's deputy of Ukraine of the first convocation. The internal conflicts in the communist-Soviet leadership, the situation of the Ukrainian SSR, the struggle for sovereignty in the Baltic republics and the Caucasus, and the U.S. position, which consisted in supporting Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforms, are analyzed. It is shown that the speech reflected Washington's cautious strategy to maintain stability in the USSR; at the same time it was criticized by Ukrainian national-democratic forces and part of the American establishment. The conclusions emphasize that the August 1991 communist coup in Moscow and the subsequent revolutionary-democratic actions of the republican governments themselves, rather than the words of George Bush Sr., were decisive for the collapse of the USSR.

## Introduction

On August 1, 1991, the Supreme Soviet of the Ukrainian SSR, where the communist majority prevailed (the Communists obtained 331 of 450 seats, while the opposition People's Movement of Ukraine and the People’s Council held about 125), received for the first time in history a sitting U.S. President—George H. W. Bush. At that time Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union; since 1922 its political and economic decisions had been controlled by the union center in Moscow. Bush Sr. addressed the deputies with a speech later dubbed “Chicken Kiev”. The speech, which called for supporting Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforms, was welcomed by the communist majority of the parliament, but met sharp criticism from the national-democratic forces of Ukraine and part of the Western media.

## Political context of the summer of 1991

### Struggle for power in the USSR

In mid-1991, the USSR was experiencing a deep political crisis. General Secretary of the CPSU (since March 1985), Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR (May 1989 – March 1990) and President of the USSR (since March 1990) Mikhail Gorbachev tried to reform the Union by combining perestroika, glasnost and democratization with the leading role of the CPSU. On April 23, 1991, at a meeting in Novo-Ogarevo he and the leaders of nine union republics agreed on the draft of a new Union Treaty (“Nine plus One” agreement). The draft provided for the creation of a

“Union of Sovereign Republics”: the republics would receive control over natural resources and priority of their own legislation, while issues of defense, foreign policy, monetary system and strategic infrastructure would remain under the jurisdiction of the union center; the Union president was to be elected by popular vote. Signing of the treaty was scheduled for August 20, 1991, but the events of August prevented its implementation.

Several groups competed for power. Gorbachev’s reforms were supported by proponents of liberalization in the CPSU leadership; the conservative wing of the party and part of the military and security apparatus feared weakening of the center; the radical democratic opposition led by Boris Yeltsin, chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian SFSR, sought greater sovereignty for Russia. On June 12, 1990, the First Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR adopted the Declaration of State Sovereignty of Russia [1], which proclaimed the supremacy of Russian laws and outlined a course toward a democratic state order. This decision increased tensions between Moscow and the union republics and undermined the monolith of the union center.

### **Situation of Ukraine**

The Ukrainian SSR was one of the key union republics of the USSR. On July 16, 1990, the Verkhovna Rada of the Ukrainian SSR adopted the “Declaration of State Sovereignty of Ukraine” [2], which declared the supremacy of Ukrainian laws, the right to its own armed forces, the creation of a National Bank and the future intention to obtain neutral non-nuclear status. Despite the appearance of sovereignty declarations, at the all-union referendum on preserving the renewed Union on March 17, 1991, a consultative republic-wide poll was held in the Ukrainian SSR; according to official data, more than 70.2% of Ukrainian voters supported the idea of a new Union of Sovereign Republics [3].

The March 1990 elections in the Ukrainian SSR provided the Communist Party with a majority: it obtained 331 of the 450 seats in the Verkhovna Rada, while the opposition People's Movement of Ukraine and the “People’s Council” faction gained about 125 mandates [4]. At the beginning of 1990 the Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada was Volodymyr Ivashko (from June 4 to July 9, 1990), who soon resigned and moved to Moscow as Deputy General Secretary of the CPSU. On July 23, 1990, Leonid Kravchuk, a member of the Communist Party's Politburo, was elected speaker of the parliament; after the abolition of the Communist Party’s monopoly on power on October 24, 1990, he became the actual head of the republic. He declared that Ukraine should be a “sovereign, full-fledged state” but within the framework of the renewed Union—this corresponded to the political line of the CPSU and the Communist Party of Ukraine. The ruling communist majority did not raise the issue of full independence; the question of statehood remained the main slogan of the opposition.

### **Independence movements and the forceful actions of the Moscow center**

From late 1990 independence movements in the Baltics (Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian SSRs) and in the Caucasus (Georgian, Azerbaijani and Armenian SSRs) demanded secession from the USSR. The Lithuanian SSR proclaimed the restoration of independence on March 11, 1990, Latvia on May 4, 1990, and Estonia on August 20, 1991. The union center responded with force operations:

- Vilnius, Lithuanian SSR, January 13, 1991 — Soviet troops and special units stormed the television tower and the radio and television building, trying to force Lithuania to rescind the Act of Restored Statehood of March 11, 1990. Thirteen civilians were killed and dozens injured [5].
- Tbilisi, Georgian SSR, April 9, 1989 — Internal troops of the USSR brutally dispersed a peaceful

demonstration calling for Georgian independence; official data record at least 20 deaths and hundreds injured or gassed. These events accelerated the movement for Georgia's secession from the USSR [6].

- Baku, Azerbaijani SSR, January 19–20, 1990 — Soviet troops entered the capital of the Azerbaijani SSR to suppress the Azerbaijani national freedom movement; according to official estimates, 147 civilians were killed and more than 800 injured [7].

These violent actions demonstrated the union center's readiness to use military and repressive force against republics striving for sovereignty, and only radicalized the national movements.

### **US policy and intelligence assessments**

The then administration of U.S. President George H. W. Bush pursued a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of the USSR and generally supported Mikhail Gorbachev's reform efforts. During his visit to Moscow in late July 1991, Bush assured the Soviet leader that the United States sought stable and peaceful changes and warned him that he would not call for Ukraine's immediate independence during his visit to Kyiv. He believed that a politically strong Gorbachev and an effective union center were necessary to preserve peace; excessive concessions to the republics could, in his view, provoke a conservative coup. This approach was reflected in his Kyiv speech, in which he emphasized support for reforms and warned against "suicidal nationalism".

US intelligence services did not foresee the rapid collapse of the USSR. A study on predictions of the USSR's collapse noted that the Central Intelligence Agency overestimated its internal stability; former CIA director Stansfield Turner acknowledged in 1991 that intelligence underestimated the scale of the political, economic and national crisis. Therefore, the Bush administration relied on a scenario of gradual reforms rather than a swift breakup [8].

The question of possible influence of Soviet propaganda or agent networks on Western assessments remains a matter of debate. Some observers suggested that official statements from the Kremlin and the KGB's information policy might have created an impression of greater stability than was actually the case. Under such conditions, and considering the extent of Soviet intelligence activity abroad, it is possible that the American intelligence community was "outplayed" by Soviet special services; yet mistakes in American forecasts can also be explained by systemic analytical shortcomings and the closed nature of communist-Soviet society.

### **The visit and speech of George Bush Sr. in Kyiv on August 1, 1991**

#### **Arrival and atmosphere**

On July 30, 1991, George Bush Sr. arrived in Moscow, where he held a lengthy meeting with Mikhail Gorbachev, and on August 1 he flew to Kyiv. It was the first visit of a sitting U.S. president to the Ukrainian SSR [9]. On the streets of the capital his motorcade was greeted by thousands; alongside American and Ukrainian flags there were banners reading "Ukraine without Moscow" and "The White House talks to communists, ignores Rukh". According to reports, Bush declined to meet with leaders of the national-democratic opposition; in the Verkhovna Rada he was welcomed by speaker Leonid Kravchuk, and both the communist majority and members of the opposition People's Council were present.

#### **Key ideas of the speech**

Bush delivered his address in the session hall of the Verkhovna Rada of the Ukrainian SSR on August 1, 1991, at approximately 3:55 p.m.; it lasted more than thirty minutes. **Its key themes**

were [10]:

**1.Support for reforms without interference.**The president declared that the United States would support those in the center and the republics who pursued freedom, democracy and economic reforms, but would not “pick winners and losers” in political contests between the center and the republics.

**2.Freedom and independence.**He emphasized that freedom is not the same as independence: Americans would not support those seeking to replace a distant tyranny with a local despotism, and would not aid “suicidal nationalism based on ethnic hatred”. He cited the risk of ethnic conflicts, citing the example of Yugoslavia.

**3.Approval of the new Union treaty.**Bush supported the draft new union agreement known as “9 plus 1”, in which nine union republics (including Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan and others) and the union center participated. He stressed that the document combined republican self-government with “voluntary interaction” and would prevent destructive isolation.

**4.Democracy and economic freedom.**The U.S. president explained that democracy involves open competition for public support, and freedom means the absence of fear of the state. In his view, a free economy cannot function without the rule of law, protection of property rights and fair contracts; he warned against trade wars between the republics.

**5.Non-interference and assistance.**Bush emphasized that the United States would not interfere in the internal affairs of the Soviet republics and would not impose its decisions, but was ready to assist reforms and provide humanitarian aid.

### **Responses and criticism**

The speech was received ambiguously. Deputies of the communist majority applauded, but the national-democratic opposition viewed it as support for Moscow and a betrayal of freedom. The leader of the People’s Movement of Ukraine, Ivan Drach, stated that Bush “seemed hypnotized by Gorbachev” and spoke less decisively about sovereignty than even some Ukrainian communists. Opposition deputy Stepan Pavliuk argued that freedom is impossible without independence and that Ukraine needed its own customs and currency. The radical faction of the People’s Council, headed by Vyacheslav Chornovil, sharply criticized the speech; its representatives, including Stepan Khmara and Viktor Bed, asserted that the address ignored Ukrainians’ right to self-determination.

Western commentators echoed the critical assessments. American columnist William Safire dubbed the speech “Chicken Kiev” and accused the president of a “colossal miscalculation”; \*The Boston Globe\* wrote that Bush was “too immersed in one side of the internal debate”. Later, after the USSR collapsed, Bush explained that he had advised Ukrainians “not to do foolish things,” fearing a violent crackdown.

### **The coup and the collapse of the USSR**

The president’s speech came three weeks before the August coup in Moscow. On August 19, 1991 a group of conservative CPSU, KGB and military officials created a State Committee on the State of Emergency and attempted to temporarily remove Mikhail Gorbachev from power; according to one version, this may have been a joint political combination agreed with Gorbachev himself, intended to prevent the signing of the new Union treaty in the new circumstances of the “parade of sovereignties”. The head of state was reportedly isolated in his residence in Foros, Crimea. However, the coup received minimal support; mass protests in Moscow and the republics, including Ukraine, led to its failure within three days [11]. These events fatally undermined the authority of the CPSU and accelerated the collapse of the USSR, and the signing of the new Union

treaty was derailed.

After the collapse of the coup events unfolded rapidly. On August 24, 1991 the Verkhovna Rada of the Ukrainian SSR adopted the Act of Declaration of Independence of Ukraine, which on December 1 was confirmed by 92.3% of participants in an all-Ukrainian referendum. On December 8, 1991, in Belovezhskaya Pushcha (Belarus), the leaders of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus—Boris Yeltsin, Leonid Kravchuk and Stanislav Shushkevich—signed the Belovezh Accords, which proclaimed the cessation of the USSR and the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States. On December 26, 1991, the Council of Republics of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR adopted Declaration No. 142-N, which formally ended the history of the Union. Thus, Bush Sr.'s speech quickly became a historical curiosity; by the end of the year the United States officially recognized Ukraine's independence.

## Conclusions

1. Unexpectedness of the collapse. In the summer of 1991, before the August coup, neither the U.S. leadership nor most opposition politicians—including in the Ukrainian SSR—expected a rapid collapse of the USSR. American analytical services overestimated the strength of the Soviet system and underestimated the influence of national-democratic movements. Ukrainian society at that time predominantly supported the idea of a reformed Union: in the all-union consultative poll on March 17, 1991, over 70% of Ukrainian residents voted for a renewed federation, and the Communists controlled the parliament, government and the entire political system. Only national-patriotic forces—primarily the People's Movement of Ukraine—openly advocated for complete independence of the Ukrainian state.

2. The speech as a reflection of cautious policy. Bush's address reflected Washington's strategic task of supporting reforms and avoiding conflict. His warnings about "suicidal nationalism" and his emphasis on non-interference demonstrated a desire to maintain stability and respect for sovereignty. From the perspective of international law this position seemed balanced; however, from the viewpoint of human rights and the right to national self-determination it appeared short-sighted to many Ukrainian and American critics.

3. Criticism and symbolism. For Ukrainian national-democratic forces the speech of George Bush Sr. became a symbol of the West's reluctance to support Ukraine's independence. In the United States some conservatives saw it as a departure from democratic principles. At the same time it is important to consider that as of August 1, 1991 Ukraine did not yet have sufficient political levers to leave the USSR, and most of its citizens supported a compromise version of a reformed Union.

4. Decisive factors — internal processes in the USSR. Events of August–December 1991 showed that internal factors—the failure of the August coup, decisive actions of national-democratic opposition forces, and decisions of parliaments and citizens—determined the breakup of the USSR and the downfall of the CPSU. Bush Sr.'s speech could neither stop nor accelerate these processes; the fate of the Union was decided primarily by the republics themselves.

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