

## Conversation with the U.S. Senator S. Nunn

September 2, 1991

**Gorbachev:** I am glad to see you, Senator. You and I have known each other for a long time. We discussed and proposed together things that at the time looked almost impossible to implement, and now they are being realized. I am glad to see you here during these days.

(**Nunn:** I am very glad to see you. It is a great honor. We all breathed a sigh of relief when you returned to your duties as President. Americans were very worried about you. It is really amazing that our countries, which had been antagonists for 40 years, have now achieved such a level of relations.)

**Gorbachev:** It is true, we have made a great journey.

We have just opened the Congress of People's Deputies. We have read the Statement to the Congress from 11 republics. It contains serious proposals.

The Statement talks about the need for the Union of Sovereign States [built] on a voluntary basis; about the Economic Agreement in the framework of a single economic space; and about the Armed Forces and the military reform. It affirms all international commitments, including those in the arms control sphere, as well as foreign economic commitments. It emphasizes the need to adopt the Declaration of human rights and the rights of minorities.

First of all, the affirmation of the Union is the most important. In recent days, a great anxiety about its fate has emerged in society. It is not an accident that the putsch took place on the eve of the signing of the Union Treaty. The putschists did not like it.

So we decided to prepare this Statement and have been working on it until the very last moment. Nazarbayev read the text, in which the last edits were handwritten.

It is important that all the members of the "9+1" process took part in it; Armenia joined them, and Georgia participated too. All this constitutes 95 percent

of the territory and of the potential of the country. We achieved a very high level of agreement.

Other republics also agree on many of the issues of the Statement. With the exception of the question of the Union, i.e. of the forms of participation in it and cooperation with it.

Our reasoning was that the Congress should not turn into a parliamentary talk shop. The country is awaiting [our] decisions and results. This is why we took such an unusual approach—presenting the Statement. And we told the deputies: now you give it some thought, think about the future.

Of course, it caused a certain shock in the beginning. But we have to get out of the situation resulting from the coup, not just blabber.

The Congress has a chance to demonstrate [its] responsibility for the fate of the country. And if it does not adopt this proposal, then the Congress is dead. I think that we will see today, [maybe] tomorrow, which way it will choose.

**(Nunn:** You were talking about the changes to the Constitution. Do you envision extensive changes?)

**Gorbachev:** We are forced to react to the changing events after the failure of the coup. Initially, the process of dissolution started with lightning speed. So fast that neither the press nor the embassies were able to comprehend it. But literally in the last several days, as people considered this question deeply, we noticed a turn, and centripetal tendencies have resumed.

In general, we have decided against presenting my report, [and] to use this agreement of the 11 republics. Now the Statement is being discussed in the republics' delegations. And the Congress continues its work. It is the Congress that we are appealing to. And we are not saying that we are the [main] authority now. We want to find decisions quickly and effectively.

(**Nunn:** What if the Congress makes a decision to disband itself, and in its place there would only be a Council of representatives of the republics, which would be making all the decisions?)

**Gorbachev:** This is a question of months—the period of transition to a new Union, new Economic union, political structures. We will need some time.

Further, you probably heard that the status of the deputies will be upheld for this transition period. After all, they were all elected legitimately, and now they are worried. But their status is upheld; they will be able to work in their districts, even in commissions.

In general, it is clear that such a transition cannot be carried out absolutely perfectly. But the choice is clear—either what we propose, which is based on the agreement of the republics, or collapse and separation. This is a tough choice. But our people are not hiding in the bushes now.

(**Nunn:** I am interested in the control of the Armed Forces, especially of the nuclear forces in the framework of the new Union. Do I understand correctly that you will remain the supreme commander of the Armed Forces?)

**Gorbachev:** We have agreed on the need for unity not only of the strategic potential but of the Armed Forces overall. Yeltsin also took a very categorical position on this issue.

It looks like Russia will have national guard units, and we are negotiating about the number now—whether it would be two, three or four thousand men. But this is just in case, whereas the Armed Forces of the country will remain unified. Kravchuk agreed with this as well.

Of course, we need a comprehensive military reform. We will have a civilian Minister of Defense and a military chief of the united or general staff. There will be structural changes; we will also be reducing troops in coordination with the republics. Taking into account the locations of the [military] units, we need a

mechanism of mutual understanding and cooperation with the republics. Shaposhnikov has already begun consultations with them.

**(Nunn:** I am very impressed with all this. As chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Defense issues [sic] [Senate Armed Services Committee] for six years now, I know how painful the issue of reducing troop numbers could be. Considering the complexity of this issue, I would like to propose working out a program of extensive military exchanges with the participation of Soviet and American officers, which would allow them to get to know each other, and would create a more favorable atmosphere overall.)

**Gorbachev:** We will agree to that. I would like to underscore: we must not allow everything that has been achieved in our relations, including the military exchanges, to be gone with the wind.

**(Nunn:** A couple of words about conversion. I have said already in May that this is the area in which we could cooperate. The United States is ready to play a leading role.

I spoke with Mr. Volsky, who informed me that you selected 112 defense enterprises for conversion and international collaboration. I will do my best to help with that.

I was very impressed by your message to the "Seven" on this issue.)

**Gorbachev:** I told President Bush that we selected several major areas where you and we can successfully cooperate. One of them is precisely the conversion of defense industries; in general, the military-industrial sphere.

We are satisfied with the fact that the United States finally agreed to launch a U.S. satellite by a Soviet missile. We have great potential here. The market for space launches is estimated at 14 billion dollars. Help us earn them, and they will come back to you in the end.

(**Nunn:** Yes, especially because here you are competitive and even have some advantages.)

**Gorbachev:** Or take, for example, the hydrogen engines of our “Energiya” missile, which is capable of lifting 100, and potentially even 200, tons into orbit. Last year, the American side expressed an interest in collaborating with us in this area, to purchase those engines. This project could give us 5 to 10 billion dollars in the next several years.

But the main thing is that it would create interdependence between us. And interdependence would mean predictability of behavior for both our countries.

Today, all our trade and economic relations are limited to our purchases of grain from the USA. But it is such a minor thing for such countries as ours; it is abnormal.

I am following the discussion that is happening in the United States now. I see the entire spectrum of opinions, including those in Congress. I see that President Bush’s position is balanced but that there are other people in Congress who speak more harshly. But I am convinced that those people are right who believe that the Soviet Union should be preserved, of course in a renewed state, and that it should take its place as a great power. This would be beneficial for us and for you as well. And not only for today but also for tomorrow.

Today, when we have delivered a blow against the reactionary forces, the coup has been defeated, we are still in a situation of serious crisis. And still, we have a good chance to continue and even accelerate the reform course. Therefore, we really need to feel each other’s shoulder.

(**Nunn:** On this day, filled with events, I want to ask you one question, quite broadly: in your view, what should the United States and the West do, and what they should not do, if we want to ensure a peaceful transition in your country in the process of implementing democratic reforms, market programs, ensuring human rights, i.e. all of your goals?)

**Gorbachev:** First and foremost, to exclude any encouragement of any processes of disintegration as our reforms proceed. I understand that the Baltic republics are a special case, and the decision to recognize them does not create a precedent.

You should take into account that centripetal tendencies have now emerged in the country again. It has literally happened in the last several days. And now it is hard for Kravchuk to explain his position. We have received a flood of telegrams: who gave the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet the right to disregard the results of the referendum?

Yesterday, Popov and others told me that a delegation of miners headed by the director of the strike committee Boldyrev arrived in Moscow unexpectedly. They put the question the following way: if the Ukraine leaves the Union, then Donbass and the South will go to Russia, to the Soviet Union. We are not even talking about the Crimea.

Therefore, I am asking—who needs the dissolution? Take the Ukraine—it is a good republic, which can develop successfully and strengthen its sovereignty, its independence, in the framework of the renewed Union. How could dissolution, division, broken lives of people, and so on, be better?

(**Nunn:** I sensed the same mood yesterday at the meeting of Soviet businessmen, which included representatives from the Ukraine. It reminded me very much of a session of the national chamber of commerce in our country. In any case, the businessmen had the same enormous cars as they do in America.)

**Gorbachev:** I am pleased to note that in the West they pay attention to our situation, that they are sending the right signals. Maybe [only] B. Mulroney did not do his best. But, maybe we should not be offended; our processes probably are too fast.

I called Kravchuk yesterday—he had doubts whether to come to the Congress or not. But I told him—if you don't come, you don't have a future even in Ukraine. Because people are in favor of the Union. And if there is dissolution, then

literally all issues will be raised—about territories, about people, about the economy, and so on.

I would like to appeal to the U.S. Congress—an organ known for its independence, which plays a substantial role in international affairs as well—through you. I want you to understand and to support us. We must not lose this chance.

Now we will seriously take charge of the economy; we need to cut our deficits, and therefore, we will cut the military budget as well. But take this into account: one has to approach it in a balanced way. We are in the process of big reductions and returning of troops. It has already led to great hardships for thousands of officers. And we cannot fail to pay attention to this, especially now, after the army stood by the people.

**(Nunn:** I think that my proposal for extensive officer exchanges could help soften the consequences of this. Possibly, you could find our post-World War II experience useful—when the law was passed protecting the rights of soldiers, on the basis of which they received support in retraining and employment.)

**Gorbachev:** In this country, we are now drafting legislation that would ensure respect for the rights and dignity of servicemen, their social protection. It will be done in the framework of the package of legislative acts on military reform.

We need to climb out of this crisis as soon as possible and to solve these intertwined issues.

Please send my regards to our mutual friends—to Senators Dole and Mitchell, Cranston, to Mr. Gephardt, and others. And, of course, to President Bush. I understand that the electoral campaign is coming up and you might experience some rough moments ...

**(Nunn:** I play golf with the President even during the electoral campaign. A wonderful feature of our political system is that regardless of the political struggle, we remain friends.)

**Gorbachev:** In this country, elements of such a political culture are only starting to come out. I think that the coup has shown that notwithstanding any disagreements, democrats cannot afford to fight with each other.

(**Nunn:** For that you need a law-based state and democratization—the goals that you set.)

**Gorbachev:** And we are moving fast toward them.

(**Nunn:** A couple of words in conclusion. I had very useful conversations here, including one with Minister Shaposhnikov. In particular, we talked about the need for radical reductions of tactical nuclear weapons in these new conditions. And the last question to you: are you confident that in those three days control of nuclear weapons was ensured?)

**Gorbachev:** Absolutely. There could be no question about them being out of [central] control. I looked at this question once again and I believe that our system of control is quite reliable. But we will probably undertake additional measures as well.

(**Nunn:** I believe that both you and we need to further improve this system of control. In particular, we discussed the possibility of installing a self-destruct mechanism for nuclear missiles in case of an unsanctioned or accidental launch. We should also improve control over nuclear weapons on the high seas.)

**Gorbachev:** I believe we should discuss these questions.

[Source: Mikhail Gorbachev, *Sobranie sochinenii*, v. 28, (Moscow: Ves Mir, 2019)  
Translated by Svetlana Savranskaya for the National Security Archive), pp. 57-62