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 PRIVY COUNCIL OFFICE
 WHITEHALL, LONDON SW1A 2AT

6 June 1990

 Pl. JM
 CDP/6/6

Dear Steiner.

LORDS PRESIDENT'S VISIT TO ST GALLEN CONFERENCE

During the Lord President's stay at St Gallen last week, he was approached by Professor Volodymyr Vassilenko who is representative of the Ukrainian SSR to the UN Commission on Human Rights and Professor at Kiev State University. We arranged for them to have a private bilateral discussion, which took place on 29 May. I thought that, partly in view of the Prime Minister's imminent visit to the USSR, it might be worth recording what transpired - although neither the Lord President nor I felt that anything very new emerged.

Vassilenko said that he wanted to talk about the participation of the USSR in the new Europe. The Republics were striving for greater independence, and in the short term when the Soviet state was so big, he expected the Union Republics to have a status rather different from that which they presently had. He wondered therefore what Sir Geoffrey thought the prospects were for them participating directly in the European process and pursuing their national interests in this way. Under the existing Ukrainian and USSR Constitutions, the Ukrainian Republic has the right to participate in foreign affairs, enter relations with other countries, sign treaties and join international organisations. The formal position was therefore that the Ukraine could now, other things being equal, be a member of European Institutions. He acknowledged that the Ukraine was not a separate member of COMECON or the Warsaw Pact, but this was the case for all the Soviet Republics. But the Warsaw Pact was not likely to be a significant feature on the scene in the future in any case. He noted that in his speech to the St Gallen Symposium the Lord President had said that a totalitarian USSR was detrimental to European security but that a democratic USSR could be a

worthwhile partner with the rest of Europe; he was not clear how the Lord President understood a "democratic USSR", which he thought could not exist so long as the nations within the USSR remained oppressed.

Responding, the Lord President said he had no clear view of the way the Union Republics could individually integrate themselves into the European process. He noted that, as Henning Christopherson had said at St Gallen the previous day, the Union Republics were different from the Baltic Republics whose absorption into the Soviet Union the vast majority of the members of the EC had not recognised; he thought that in practice any change in the status of, say, the Ukraine would depend on the federal authority of the Soviet Union, for all that the Ukraine has its own seat at the United Nations. As to the role of nationalities within a wider Union such as the USSR, and how this could be reconciled with democratic principles, this question was by no means unique to the USSR. He instanced the current discussions in Canada about the position of Quebec, or indeed the aspirations of some at any rate of the Scots within the UK. The union of the kingdoms was fundamental in the UK, as was the Federation in the USSR, but in all these structures there were degrees of subtlety, whether or not the systems of Government were democratic.

Vassilenko went on to explain that when the USSR was created in 1922 it was a free Union of only four Republics. The Caucasus, the Ukraine and Byelorussia all signed the treaty; but Stalin subsequently infringed the terms of that original treaty to create the unitary Soviet State. A key priority now was to review the Union treaty and get back to the original contract.

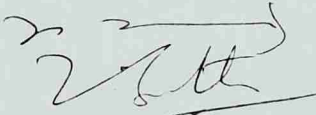
As to the Baltic Republics, he was clear that they originally had no intention of quitting the USSR. They had initially offered President Gorbachev negotiations for an Inter-Republic Conference to review the Union Treaty and only when he refused had they decided to leave the Union. They had gone their own way, denouncing the agreements between Stalin, Molotov and Ribbentrop as illegal and declaring themselves occupied States, against the background that President Gorbachev had promised two years ago a new constitution and had set up a Constitutional Commission of which he was the President, but which had never met and had done nothing.

But he stressed that the Ukraine and Byelorussia saw their position as very different. They wanted to sign a new Union Treaty, and were not contemplating declaring their independence; but equally they wanted to be direct participants in all the European processes as they unfolded. He was sure that the direct participation of the Union Republics in the European process would help to establish democracy in the USSR, would help to build real security and economic co-operation in Europe, and would also help President Gorbachev in his domestic political difficulties. If the Soviet Union remained in its present state, he saw great danger in the conflicts and social tensions that had emerged.

Commenting, the Lord President said that he had found this explanation of the background and the difference between the Baltic Republics and the Ukraine very helpful. The Ukraine and other Union Republics would need great skill and a readiness to talk with the Kremlin to negotiate a return to the original basis of the Union which they still regarded as legitimate. As far as participation in Europe and European institutions went, the UK understood and sympathised with what had been said, but would not want to act in a fashion that would precipitate conflict or disagreement with or within the USSR.

The meeting ended with brief personal reminiscences of the Lord President's visit as Foreign Secretary to Kiev and his meeting with the then Ukrainian Foreign Minister, and the Deputy Prime Minister of the Ukraine, Orlik (whom Vassilenko said would not be there much longer because he thought she would be forced out by the Ukrainian Parliament in the session now under way, along with a number of changes he foresaw in the old guard Government in the Ukraine); and finally mutual expectations of the success of the Prime Minister's own imminent visit to Kiev.

I am copying this letter to Charles Powell in No 10.


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