

A FIRST HAND ACCOUNT OF THE 1988 SOVEREIGNTY VOTE

In November of 1988, the Estonian Supreme Council (the official Communist governing body of Estonia) voted that Estonian laws would take precedence over those laws coming out of Moscow. Gorbachev was infuriated. Below is the first-hand account of then Supreme Council Chairman Arnold Rüütel, who later would become Estonian President from 2001-2006. This is excerpted from his book "Estonia: A Future Returned".

Source: "Estonia: A Future Returned" by Arnold Rüütel. Copyright 2003 Arnold Rüütel.

Sovereignty!

The new constitution was to come up for discussion in the USSR Supreme Council in 1989, but before that Moscow wanted to conduct discussions of the amendments in the union republics. As pointed out above, the position in Estonia was clear both concerning the constitutional amendments as well as a bill on the election of people's deputies that was discussed at the same time. The board of the Popular Front was the first to publicly state it at the end of October 1988, pointing out that adoption of the bills would destroy even the formal sovereignty the union republics retained.

Therefore, the Popular Front called for collection of signatures against the constitutional amendments and the election law. We then received at Kadriorg 21,480 letters including 428 minutes of meetings signed by a total of 891,987 people. It was a powerful protest action.

On 4 November I signed a decree on the convocation of an extraordinary session of the Supreme Council on 16 November. It could not be delayed any longer, because the bills prepared in Moscow significantly limited the rights of union republics and their endorsement could take place quite soon.

The presidium trusted me to head the commission preparing for the session. The aim of the commission was to generalize the proposals we had received and to work out a position for presentation to the USSR Supreme Council Presidium. The position was unanimous: the Estonian SSR would declare its sovereign rights and the supremacy of its laws over those of the Soviet Union. We decided to state it clearly in a Declaration of Sovereignty to be presented to the session.

I called my colleagues in Armenia, Georgia, Lithuania, Latvia, Moldova and Ukraine and asked them to adopt similar decision in order to form a united front. They didn't say "No" but it was clear from their reaction that they were not ready to do it yet. The Estonian Party leader, Vaino Väljas, agreed on joint action with First Secretary of the Communist Party of Latvia Janis Vagris and his Lithuanian colleague Algirdas Brazauskas, but at the last moment they withdrew their promises to declare sovereignty of their republics.

When information about our intention reached Moscow, it was decreed from there that a meeting of the so-called Party activists would take place in the Communist Party of Estonia Central Committee on 14 November. A couple of days earlier a member of the Political Bureau and chairman of the KGB, Victor Chebrikov, had arrived in Tallinn. Among other things he visited the Moscow-subordinated Dvigatel factory and took part in a Linnahall meeting of the Interfront, a movement advocating anti-Estonian sentiments. Speakers at the meeting accused the Estonian leadership of ignoring interests of the working class and preferring the Popular Front to the Interfront.

In his speech to the Party activists Chebrikov was angry because the Popular Front could but the Interfront could not express its positions in the radio and the television and the Communist Party failed to keep abreast of the developments. He was also dissatisfied with the insistent nature of some of our documents - it was not difficult to understand that he referred to the Declaration of Sovereignty we were planning to adopt. Vaino Väljas, however, underlined in his speech the status of the Estonian language and culture and Estonia's sovereignty.

At this point, it should be said about the then Communist Party of Estonia that it was divided into a patriotic as well as a conservative part, the latter fighting for the preservation of the Soviet empire. The contradictions within the split Party were even sharper than in the Estonian society as a whole. Therefore, the Communist Party of Estonia supported the so-called blanket citizenship option (granting of citizenship to all then residents of Estonia) and Estonian-Russian bilingualism. But it was to its credit that it took every effort to keep the situation stable and did not obstruct the activity of other organizations.

Change of the leader had released in the Communist Party of Estonia aspirations to make life more civilized in Estonia. It saw Estonia's self-management as one of its main aims, with the IME program declared its program of action. The progressive part, the so-called Väljas' party, finally separated, but remained true to the position that the future of Estonia would be within the Soviet Union on the basis of such a Union Treaty that would give the republic free hands in all vitally important issues.

A day before the adoption of Declaration of Sovereignty I had been summoned to Moscow to see Anatoli Lukyanov, Vice-Chairman of the USSR Supreme Council Presidium. The meeting lasted one and a half hours and mainly consisted of threats at my address for having discussed such an anti-Union issue in the presidium and even decided to present it to the Supreme Council. Lukyanov warned me that if we did not drop our plans I would be held responsible for the consequences. He directly referred to an article on anti-constitutional activity, which stipulated a ten-year prison term.

Next I was in for a dressing-down by the CPSU Central Committee deputy secretary for ideology. Also the Party functionary responsible for the Baltic republics was present in the office. The substance and tone of the conversation were similar to Lukyanov's so that I had to suffer nearly two more hours of the volley of threats. Now I, too, was speaking at a raised tone. Usually such things do not happen to me because I mostly manage to restrain myself outwardly, but that time my nerves failed me.

Suddenly the high-placed ideology leader left his office, saying Gorbachev wanted to see him. As I later heard, he went to consult with the KGB chief and the interior and foreign ministers. They discussed ways of preventing the Estonians from carrying out their plan. To prevent the session, they wanted to arrest me to keep me in Moscow. But Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze was against it, saying that would arouse undesired international attention.

When the ideology secretary returned, the conversation continued in the old vein. I stood my ground, declaring we would call the Supreme Council after all and put the Declaration of Independence to vote and see what the deputies would decide. I well remember I referred to it as the "Declaration of Independence". Finally I was given the opportunity to return to Estonia by an evening flight.

The next morning a large crowd in the Palace Square with slogans such as "Forward to the Law-governed State! ", "Only Sovereign Estonia! ", "Be Brave, Rütel, Väljas, Toome!" was waiting for those arriving for the Supreme Council session.

The session began with a meeting of the council of elders. I had asked that meetings should be separately held with Estonian and Russian-speaking deputies. To the Estonians I told more or less

the truth, but still not the whole truth, about my meetings in Moscow. I was sure that if I told them about all the threats, many deputies would not dare vote for the declaration of sovereignty. To the Russian-speaking deputies I told that it had been difficult to get our intentions endorsed in Moscow, but they had agreed in principle with the declaration being put to the vote. They were incredulous, looking at each other with surprise in their eyes, but then apparently thought this could be some kind of Moscow tactic.

One of our tactical moves was that Vaino Väljas should chair the Supreme Council session. This had to make even those deputies opposing the idea believe that it was a thing agreed with the Party and Moscow. Väljas be praised! He was resolute in performing the duties of chairman of the session, blocking all attempts to thwart adoption of the Declaration of Sovereignty.

On that day, 16 November 1988, the independence of a union republic was spoken about for the first time at Toompea. I told the deputies about the proposals by residents, work collectives and deputies for Estonia's secession from the Soviet Union, which had been made in 165 written addresses to the Supreme Council Presidium. I naturally kept silent about the fact that some of the proposals had been sent to us at our own request. I also informed the Supreme Council that more than 860,000 people had supported suspension of the undemocratic discussion of the Constitution of the USSR.

When the declaration was finally put to vote in the Toompea hall, the overwhelming majority of the deputies were in favor. Only one deputy voted against and five abstained, but there were those who left the hall for the time of the voting.

What did the Declaration of Sovereignty stipulate? "Sovereignty of the Estonia SSR means that it wields via its highest bodies of power, government and the judiciary bodies supreme power in its territory ... In accordance with it the republic's further fate in the USSR should be determined by means of a Union Treaty ... Referring to international pacts, the Estonian SSR Supreme Council, the highest body representing the power of the people in the Estonian SSR, declares supremacy of its laws in the territory of the Estonian SSR."

The Supreme Council stipulated the same principles in a law on amendments to the Estonian SSR Constitution. It was amendment of its Article 74 that established supremacy of Estonian laws by declaring that the Estonian SSR Supreme Council was vested with the right of suspending implementation of USSR law if the latter violated sovereignty of the Estonian SSR. Simultaneously the Supreme Council adopted a resolution on the Union Treaty and a decision concerning the bills of amendments to the USSR Constitution and on the election USSR people's deputies.

Through the whole day there were live radio and TV transmissions from the Toompea hall. When the session ended late at night, the deputies went to Linnahall, where a full house - several thousand people - had been waiting for us for hours and received us with jubilation. This moving moment showed that decisions the Estonians had long waited for had been adopted.

Afterwards, more than 50,000 letters containing expressions of recognition of our decision arrived at Kadriorg from Estonia and abroad within a short time. At the end of 1988 adoption of the Declaration of Sovereignty was assessed as the most important political event of the year in Estonia.

The act was an extremely serious signal also for the Kremlin: never before during the seventy years of the existence of the Soviet Union a union republic or public figure in that empire had ever declared anything of the kind: our laws have supremacy over Soviet laws!

To characterize the importance of those documents we first have to recall that nearly one year still remained until the fall of the Berlin wall. Secondly: Estonia was about nine months ahead of all the then union republics. Finally I can only reiterate what was said in 1991: in essence, on 16 November 1988 we set in motion a process for the democratic restructuring of the Soviet Union and for Estonia's secession from the union to which we had come as a consequence of annexation. When Lithuania and Latvia, and later other republics followed our example, it was pertinent to say that a virus caught from Estonia destroyed the empire.

Professor Eerik-Juhan Truuväli, later Legal Chancellor of the Republic of Estonia, has evaluated these decisions as a revision of the socio-economic and political principles of socialism. The professor particularly underlined the clear expression of the aspiration for independence in the declaration.

News about the adoption of the Estonian sovereignty declaration spread like wildfire around the world. Many foreign journalists arrived in Tallinn. A new age seemed to have come to Estonia. Indeed, this extraordinary session ended one stage in the restoration of Estonia independence and marked the beginning of a new, much serious phase.

Supremacy of Estonian laws in our territory brought the idea of independence to central USSR bodies on a constitutional level, creating a constitutional contradiction. And it could not be solved by means of sapper's spades the way the central authorities attempted to do a few months later in Georgia.

Eventually, the Kremlin failed to find an adequate countermeasure to our move. So we saw the empire had no adequate political program and we could continue on our way by means of political measures without violence. Other republics now dared follow our example as well. This way we laid the basis to the political disintegration of the Soviet Union. Moscow naturally attempted to take countermeasures but these proved to be toothless.

Because of Estonia, the USSR Supreme Council Presidium was called on 26 November, where I had to stand before the desk like a trespassing schoolboy and listen to humiliations for four hours without a break. This time I tolerated everything with outward calmness; I even presented Estonia's well-founded views on the issue of sovereignty and explained to them the principles of our decision. All the members of the presidium deemed it their duty to express opinions about them, but finally our Declaration of Sovereignty was declared invalid - on the ground that some of its stipulations were in contradiction with the USSR Constitution.

They also demanded my discharge from the post of chairman of the Supreme Council Presidium. But Moscow did not have a mechanism for that and the plan would apparently have failed in the Estonian Supreme Council. Besides, the body of supreme power in Estonia enjoyed very strong support by the people. Therefore all they could do was to demand that I apologize to the USSR Supreme Council and renounce the Declaration of Sovereignty at a session that was to begin in a couple of days.

I naturally saw no reason for apologies. Instead, I was planning to explain the situation, which had made us to make the decision in question as well as to take other steps toward sovereignty.

An unusually large number of reporters were permitted into the Supreme Council session hall this time, because they wanted to forward to the whole world the message of the Estonians' retreat and Rütel's apologies. A Finnish TV team was there as well, and later they gave me a video recording of the session. Among other things, it shows how closely Gorbachev was following my speech from behind the presidium desk.

I was unexpectedly given the floor soon after the opening of the session. Gorbachev sat up slightly from his seat to hear the words better, although the hall was so quiet you could have heard a needle fall. When I ended my speech, the hall remained silent, although in those days it was customary to applaud after every speech. The silence lasted long enough to permit me to get back to my seat behind the presidium desk. Gorbachev was silent too and the next speech was still not announced.

Suddenly the clap of a hand was heard from somewhere. Then the whole big hall seemed to heave a sigh, and burst into a loud applause. It was unexpected to me, to say nothing about Gorbachev or other leaders of the Union. I do not still know who the first clap came from but I do remember my sense of victory. I felt that the Kremlin's totalitarian power broke at that moment and a fracture appeared in the empire.

Perceiving a clear danger to the sticking together of the Soviet Union, the Kremlin attempted to introduce into the Constitution an article that would have permitted it to take repressive measures, such as imprisonment, if someone deliberately violated the USSR Constitution. But nothing could be done against legally taken decisions of a legitimate supreme council.

Although serious efforts were taken, even the simultaneous formation of the "Internationalist front" or, as it came to be called, the Interfront in all the Baltic countries, could achieve nothing against it. In Kremlin conservatives' opinion, it was an expression of so-called pluralism and therefore a fully democratic method of defending principles of perestroika. The Interfront soon began organizing meetings and strikes to make the leadership of the republic give up their chosen course. The CPE Central Committee gave me the assignment to hold talks with representatives of the movement, but the talks mostly turned into a unilateral presentation of demands and threats.