

TOWARDS THE STATE OF LATVIA

No. 4

The August 1991 coup and how it lead to restoration of Latvia's independence

Latvia 100 

In August 1991, the interior policy and domestic and economic crisis-ridden USSR experienced the attempted coup, which ultimately accelerated the collapse of the USSR and restoration of independence of the Baltic States. The August Coup was a last-ditch attempt to prevent restoration of independence and overthrow the legitimate power of the Republic of Latvia.

Historical Context

At the end of the 1980-ies, Mikhail Gorbachev, who came to power in 1985, initiated reforms in the totalitarian USSR. Reforms lead to gradual introduction of democratic freedoms, such as pluralism and the freedom of press, radio and television. Media became less and less subjected to censorship. The democratization process initiated by the leadership of the USSR was perceived by the Baltic nations as a chance, a possibility to get rid of the prolonged occupation by the USSR, which lasted since 1940-ies. In 1988 popular movements were created in the Baltic States - in Latvia it was the Popular Front of Latvia, or the PFL. Their main objective of these movements was to restore the independence of the Baltic States.

In 1990 the popular movements of the Baltic States won the local parliamentary elections by an overwhelming majority. The PFL won also the Latvian elections of March-April 1990.

Image 1



Image 1

The traffic flow across the Vanšu Bridge on the side of the Old Town. The armoured vehicle BTR of the Soviet Army on the bridge. 19-20 August 1991 in Rīga.

Author unknown

Collection of the Museum of Barricades of 1991

Image 2

OMON unit officer throws a smoke grenade (candle) from Jēkaba Street in the direction of Mazā Pils Street. The OMON officer with AKS-74U over the shoulder. Jēkaba Street barricade made of granite blocks provided by sculptor Ojārs Feldbergs and anti-tank hedgehogs made of metal beams (i.e. the Czech hedges) and the Riga Stock Exchange in the background. 21 August 1991.

Author unknown

Collection of the Museum of the Barricades of 1991

Election victory made it possible to adopt the Declaration of Independence of 4 May 1990. More than two-thirds of MPs voted in favour of it.

Considering that the real takeover of power would be much more complicated, the Declaration of Independence provided for step-by-step transition to independence. However, no deadlines or processes was explicitly specified. Leadership of the USSR refused to accept the Declaration of Independence of 14 May 1990. Mikhail Gorbachev, the President of the Soviet Union, signed a decree deeming Baltic States' declarations of independence illegal. The next day, the opponents of Latvia's independence attempted to occupy the building of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Latvia, now the Saeima.

Soviet army deployed in Latvia stood against the newly-established government of Latvia under the leadership of Ivars Godmanis. The opponents of Latvia's independence, the Latvian Communist Party, the Equality Faction of the Supreme Council, the Baltic Soldiers' Union and others joined opposition forces and established a committee for the defence of the rights of citizens of the USSR and the Latvian SSR. At the end of 1990, this formation was renamed into the All-Latvian Public Rescue Committee. It tried to split the Latvian society based on, inter alia, ethnic origin, i.e. divide the population into Latvians and Latvian inhabitants with different ethnic backgrounds. The situation aggravated, and the escalation spilled over in January 1991 when there were attempts to overthrow the legitimate governments by military force occurred, starting with Lithuania and later also in Latvia.

It was possible to stop these reactionary attempts thanks to the popular support – the



Image 2

barricades were mounted up around the government buildings and other strategic buildings and guarded by thousands of unarmed civilians. The response of the international community was also essential. Western countries warned the USSR's leadership that violence in the Baltic States would severely damage the international position of the USSR. A number of civilians were killed in attacks initiated by the USSR's special services in Latvia, however, the opponents of independence failed to seize power.

In 1991 the economic situation in the USSR continued to deteriorate. The central government led by Gorbachev gradually lost control over the situation in the country, but it declined any negotiations with the Baltic States on the restoration of independence and offered the so-called "Union Treaty" or alternative version of the USSR membership. In the summer of 1991 the relations between the Baltic States and the USSR leadership entered a deadlock.

Image 3

Two OMON military armoured personnel carriers BTR at the barricades on Jēkaba Street. The OMON officers armed with truncheons and AKMS. An OMON officer holds a smoke grenade (candle) in his hand and puts on a gas mask.

The Riga Cathedral at the background, 21 August 1991.

The author unknown

Collection of the Museum of Barricades of 1991

Causes of the 1991 August Coup

From the very outset, the reforms initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev had many opponents in the ruling nomenklatura, including the military and security community. Dissatisfaction grew when Gorbachev launched extensive processes of democratization. The elections held under democratic, even though limited, conditions proved that the days of the Communist Party's monopoly were numbered. An increasing proportion of the society supported the socio-political forces that advocated other governance principles based not on force and repressions, but on the free will and choice of citizens. The society was also disappointed with the USSR's economic model - the only area where the USSR was able to compete with Western countries was military industry. By contrast, the quality of life of the average population in the USSR was significantly lower than in the Western countries.

The economic reforms were unsuccessful, the USSR was falling deeper into political and economic turmoil, different riots, including ones at a scale of republics, broke out in the country. Baltic States continued to insist on the restoration of their independence. Many representatives of the Soviet leadership and the central government of the USSR and republics that were still in the USSR believed that the situation in the country could be quelled by using the methods favoured by the Soviet Union for decades - strict centralism and cruel repressions of the disobedient. Dissatisfaction grew, particularly in the military and national security services.

Gorbachev was keen to reform the public



Image 3

administration of the USSR and give the USSR's republics greater autonomy by concluding the New Union Treaty. Most of the Soviet republics agreed to this plan, but the Baltic States sternly rejected the possibility of remaining in the USSR. The signing of the Union Treaty was scheduled for 20 August, and, most likely, the desire to prevent this from happening prompted the representatives of the conservative forces to attempt the coup on 19 August.

Image 4 and 5

Joint Statement of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Latvia and the Council of Ministers of 19 August 1991, which declared the State Committee of the State of Emergency illegal and having no powers in Latvia. The citizens are encouraged not to cooperate with it, and to pursue peaceful resistance.

Collection of the State Archives of Latvia

How the Coup unraveled

A number of high-ranking USSR officials attempted a coup on 19 August in Moscow, at the time when Mikhail Gorbachev, President of the USSR, was on a vacation. Coup plot organisers declared the establishment of the State Committee on the State of Emergency at 1:00 am. Gennady Yanayev, Vice President of the USSR, took charge of the committee, which was comprised of a number of leading members of the Soviet establishment. The state of emergency was introduced for the next six months, the censorship was imposed and orders were given to the army to take over most important state institutions. Initially, it seemed that the coup will succeed, as the army obeyed the orders of the coup plot organisers, and their media interventions were broadcast on the central television channels. On the morning of 19 August, Boris Yeltsin, President of the Russian Federation, addressed the citizens of Russia, and branded this coup d'état reactionary and anti-constitutional, urging the citizens to start an open-ended national protest strike.

On 19 August, at 10:00 am, the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Latvia and the Government of the Republic of Latvia held a joint sitting, declaring that they considered the State Committee on the State of Emergency illegal and having no powers on the territory of Latvia. Alfrēds Rubiks, the leader of the Latvian Communist Party, expressed his full support to the participants of the coup. On 19 August, Fyodor Kuzmin, the head of the USSR's occupation forces in Latvia, the Commander of the Baltic Military District, spoke with Anatoly Gorbunov, Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Latvia, over the phone and demanded to fulfil all his demands as the representative of the State Committee on the State of Emergency in Latvia or otherwise Anatolijs Gorbunovs would be arrested. Alfrēds Rubiks also threatened

Image 6

Four OMON officers standing on the balcony of the Latvian Radio House.

21 August 1991

Photograph: Laimonis Martinsons.

Collection of the National History Museum of Latvia

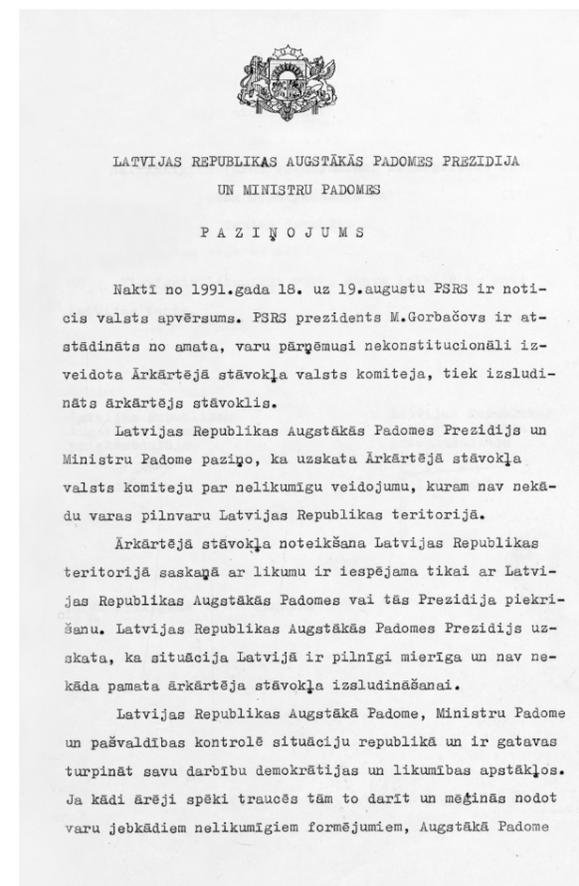


Image 4

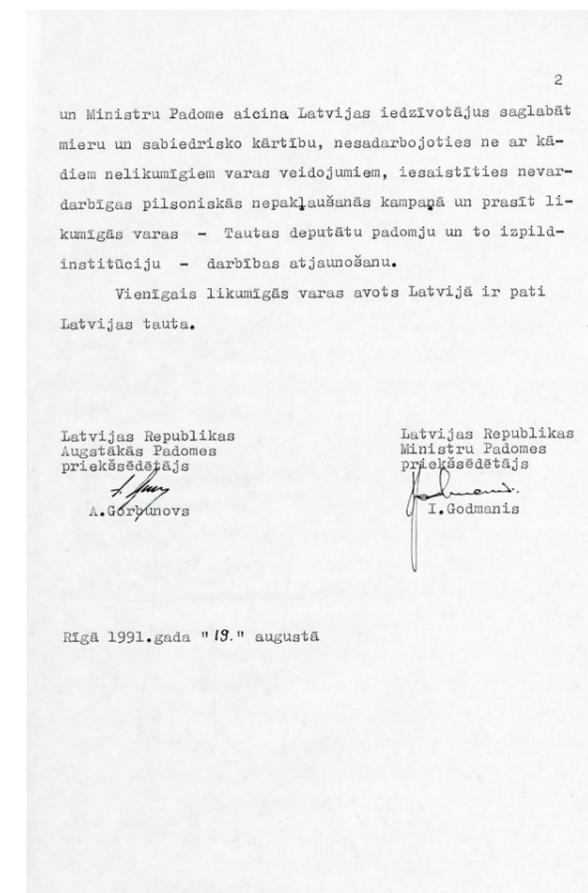


Image 5



Image 6

Image 7

Dissemination of the Constitutional Law of the Republic of Latvia "On the Status of the Republic of Latvia" on 21 August 1991 in Riga.

Photograph: Uldis Pāže

Collection of the National History Museum of Latvia

those who would oppose with the use of force and arrests.

Soon these threats became –a reality: the OMON Riga (Militia Special Purpose Unit of the Ministry of the Interior of the USSR) and other occupation forces, the units of the Baltic Military District, attacked the television centre and the radio, took over and destroyed a number of buildings of state and public institutions. The government security was disarmed.

During the coup of 19 August, OMON Riga officers opened fire near the Ministry of the Interior at a passing minibus and killed its driver Raimonds Salmiņš injuring several passengers.

Given the extremely high risk of bloodshed, the government decided not call on the people to defend the buildings of national significance. The people were urged to engage in peaceful acts of civil disobedience and refrain from collaborating with organizers of the the coup d'état.

The fate of the coup was decided in Moscow, the capital of the Soviet Union as the organizers of the coup failed to crush their opponents. The supporters of the coup were afraid to use extensive force, which would most likely result in massive bloodshed. The organizers of the coup gradually lost control over the process, and already on 22 August, most of the organizers of the coup were detained. The coup failed largely due to the firm position of Russia's leadership at the time. They completely rejected any attempts to save the collapsing USSR. The President of the Russian Federation of that time, B. Yeltsin, unlike current political elite of the Russian Federation, did not associate the Russian Federation with the USSR or its political culture.



Image 7

Image 8

The Constitutional Law of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Latvia "On the Status of the Republic of Latvia" proclaims complete independence of the Republic of Latvia by terminating the transitional period set out in the Declaration of 4 May.

Collection of the State Archives of Latvia

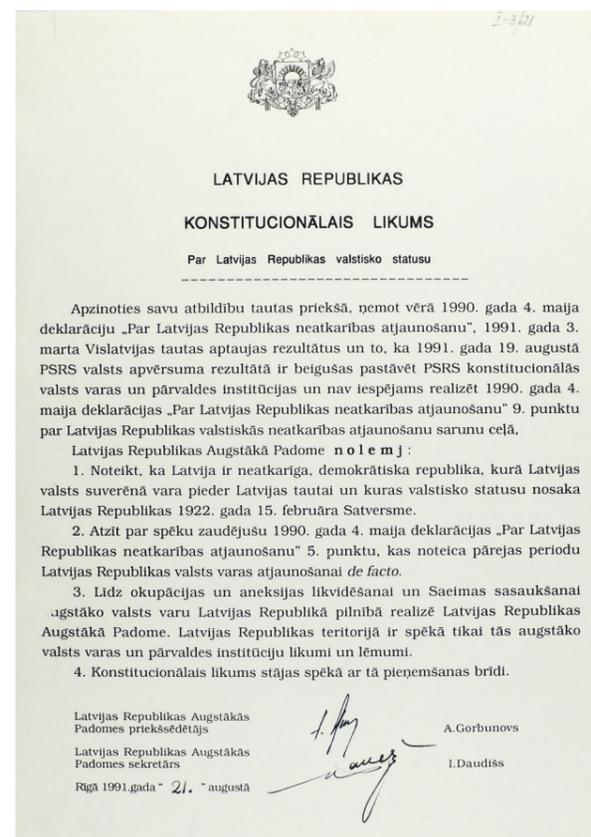


Image 8

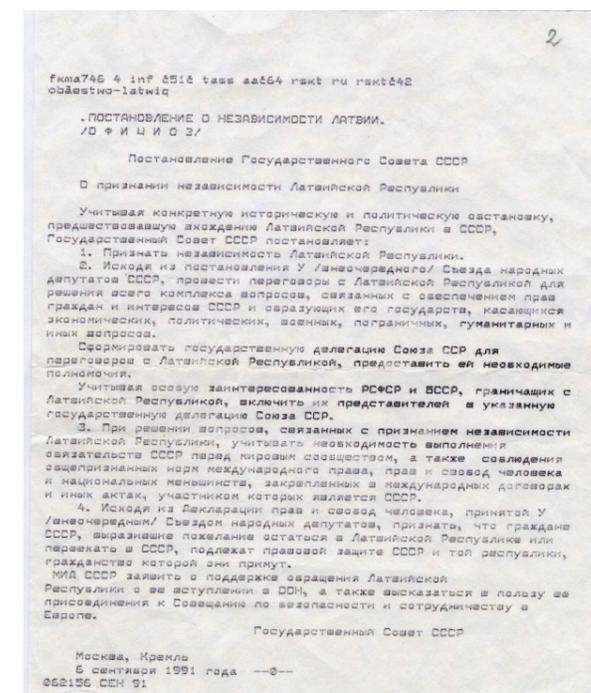


Image 9

Image 9

Decree of the State Council of the USSR "On the Recognition of the Independence of the Republic of Latvia"

Collection of the State Archives of Latvia

Image 10

Dismantling of the Lenin monument on 25 August 1991 in Rīga.

Photographer: Gunārs Birkmanis

Collection of the Latvian War Museum

As we approach the centenary of Latvia, the State Chancellery is producing a series of stories about the formation of the State of Latvia and its founders. These stories are aimed at strengthening the sense of statehood, raising awareness of the history of Latvia and its national values, as well as presenting notable people who influenced history and strongly contributed to the foundation and growth of the State of Latvia, particularly to the work of the government.

We are grateful to Dr. hist. Gatis Krūmiņš for his contribution to the fact sheet on the August 1991 Coup and how it led to restoration of Latvia's independence.

On 21 August, the Supreme Council of the Republic of Latvia passed the constitutional law "On the Statehood of the Republic of Latvia", ending the transition period and restoring Latvia's statehood. Most countries of the world recognized Latvia's independence shortly after. The Republic of Iceland was the first foreign country to recognize the restoration of Latvia's independence on 22 August 1991. On 24 August, the Russian Federation recognized the restoration of Latvia's independence, and on 6 September, the State Council of the collapsing USSR did the same.

The restoration of independence was a vital factor in the development of the Latvian nation. In spite of complicated economic transformations following the collapse of the economic space of the Soviet Union, Latvia succeeded in rebuilding the public administration according to the standards of a modern and democratic European state, an economy that is compatible with the principles of free market, as well as Latvia's representation in various international organizations. With the restoration of independence, Latvia returned to its cultural and historical values and began re-integrating with the Western political, economic and security structure.



Image 10

Please find information about the origins of our state, its path towards independence and Latvia's centenary events at:

LV100.lv
www.mk.gov.lv/simtgade

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