

## ‘The centre, c'est moi’ from Le Monde (10 December 1991)

**Caption:** On 10 December 1991, commenting on the political break-up of the USSR and the actions of Mikhaïl Gorbachev, the French newspaper Le Monde considers the reaction of the Moscow leadership.

**Source:** Le Monde. dir. de publ. LESOURNE, Jacques. 10.12.1991, n° 14 577; 48e année. Paris: Le Monde. "Le centre, c'est moi", p. 1.

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## The centre, c'est moi

'I am the centre. That is how it is and will always be, because I am convinced that the Union will survive.' Thus spoke Mikhail Gorbachev last Friday in an interview for TF1 broadcast on Sunday 8 December. On that same Sunday, in an interview on Ukrainian TV, the President of the former USSR repeated his statement and challenged Ukraine's right to secede. He presented himself as the defender of millions of Russians in the Crimea and Kazakhstan saying, 'I'm only just beginning the fight.'

Mr Gorbachev must have known that the Presidents of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus were, at that very moment, getting ready to proclaim the demise of the Soviet Union and the birth of a 'Community of Sovereign States' in which he would have no place or role. Hence the inevitable question: is he bluffing, mistaking his own incantations for reality, or is he serious?

The answer should emerge over the next few days. If the statements referred to are just hot air, then Mr Gorbachev will once again bow out, even if it means resigning after playing the prophet of doom one last time. If he is not bluffing, he will take steps to try to save the Union, as he said last Sunday, by speaking directly to the people over the heads of those 'politicians who juggle with notions such as the State and the nation and who impose their views on the people'.

This second scenario is, of course, the worst. At the point that we have reached, it could only lead to a new coup attempt and, apart from the army, where else could Gorbachev hope to find the *arguments* to ensure that he is listened to by those to whom he refers pejoratively as 'political hacks', many of whom, until very recently, were his brothers in the nomenklatura?

Is Mr Gorbachev, who will always be credited with not resorting to force to oppose the escape of Central and Eastern Europe from the Soviet gulag, now ready to take that step? Judging by his character, it is unlikely. An indecisive person, he has always hated bloodshed. But he must realise that the current softly, softly approach cannot halt the collapse that is under way.

But Moscow is still rife with rumours of a coup. Even leaders in the Baltic Republics that are now independent fear a show of strength by the demoralised, humiliated and divided Soviet Army which is still omnipresent and carries a plentiful supply of nuclear weapons. And the threat of civil war never seemed more likely than at the start of a winter which may well be marked by bread riots. But why in heaven's name would Mr Gorbachev be party to such a nightmare scenario?