

THE SEARCH FOR "SOCIALIST PLURALISM": GORBACHEV'S VISION OF THE FUTURE

by Leon Aron, Ph.D.

Whatever other feelings he may inspire, General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev has people confused. The more thoughtful and informed observers are especially puzzled. Suffering from acute symptoms to cognitive dissonance, they see very real changes in the Soviet Union, yet feel that the system remains fundamentally the same. Now, on the third anniversary of Gorbachev's assumption of power, is as good a time as any to alleviate these symptoms.

We have to reexamine some of our core conceptions of the Soviet state, especially in its relations with the civil society. As Gorbachev himself has done, we must reeducate ourselves with regard to the state's resilience, flexibility, resources, and limitations. More important, by extrapolating from the trends of the last three years, we must try to address the most momentous question of all, which so far has been overshadowed by the fun and games of Kremlinology: if he does have his way, where will Gorbachev take the Soviet political system? What is the final destination of the *perestroika* train?

Guided by Suspicion. Gauging the contours of Gorbachev's blueprint is not, of course, an easy task — and at least as difficult for him as it is for us. But it is not a hopeless endeavor as we are sometimes led to believe. I think that the precision of Gorbachev's vision of the future is roughly comparable to that of the protagonist of one of Shakespeare's sonnets, who said: "suspect I may yet not directly tell." And so, guided by this "suspicion," relying on the political instincts that have served him so remarkably well in the past, Gorbachev inches toward his vision of a "new" Soviet Union. In the process, the General Secretary performs an elaborate, if not always elegant, dance, in which the sequence of moves thus far has been the reverse of Lenin's famous "one step forward, two steps backward." And by now he has left enough footprints for us to discern the general direction.

That the political component of Gorbachev's restructuring is of an explicitly utilitarian nature, openly intended for and subordinated to economic revival, should not detract from the earnestness with which their conception and implementation were attended. The chronology of Gorbachev's revolution bespeaks urgency, even inevitability.

Soviet authors openly admit now that political restructuring was not part of the mandate given to Gorbachev by the inaugural meeting of the Central Committee in April of 1985.

Leon Aron is Salvatori Fellow in Soviet Studies at The Heritage Foundation.

He spoke at The Heritage Foundation on April 12, 1988.

ISSN 0272-1155. ©1988 by The Heritage Foundation.

Throughout that year and for the better half of 1986, the expectations were that the Andropov law-and-order model – work discipline, vigilantism, the anti-alcoholism and anti-corruption campaigns – would suffice, along with continuous administrative reshuffling: eliminate a ministry here, merge two ministries there, create a super-administration and then break it into three ministries. The results apparently were far from satisfactory, confirming what reform-minded economists and sociologists had been telling the Soviet leaders for at least a decade. According to a witness from the Soviet leadership, "having started the implementation of the socio-economic measures, the party once again realized that success in such a big, nation-wide business is impossible in the absence of the broadest participation of the working people."¹

Pillars of Stalinism. It was precisely this sort of participation that Gorbachev set out to achieve when, after two failed attempts, he received the Central Committee's approval of a revised mandate at the January plenum in 1987. As the General Secretary told a group of Soviet literati a year later, "let's once again remember the January plenum with a kind word: it led us to the realization of the necessity of broad democratization of our society."²

Gorbachev's radicalization continued unimpeded from January through the late spring. A halt to the reformers' ascent was signaled by the plenum's resolution on economic reform: half-hearted and contradictory, it left untouched, among other things, such pillars of the Stalinist economic policy as state-set prices and state "orders" to enterprises.

The second stage of Gorbachev's "revolution" saw the General Secretary's mysteriously long vacation and the resurgence of the center right in the speeches of the *de facto* second secretary Yegor Ligachev and KGB chief Viktor Chebrikov in the early fall. The attack of the conservatives reached a crescendo at the October plenum and led to the dismissal of the Moscow party chief Boris Yeltsin, the radical and outspoken supporter of reform.

Attack on Political Relaxation. The third, current, phase was inaugurated by Gorbachev's November 2, 1987, speech celebrating the 70th anniversary of the October Revolution, in which he emerged in the entirely uncharacteristic role of a spokesman for the center, a voice of moderation and a consensus monger. This phase is static trench warfare. On the reformers' side, there is consolidation and regrouping. In the opposite camp, there is increasing assertiveness and even occasional raids as evidenced by Ligachev's interview in *Le Monde* and a recent article in *Sovetskaya Rossia*. On December 4, Ligachev stated that he, and not the General Secretary, chaired meetings of the Central Committee's Secretariat. While the practice of the *de facto* second Secretary's chairing such meetings seems to go back to the Brezhnev years, Ligachev's touting this arrangement, just days before Gorbachev's visit to Washington, is unprecedented. The leader of the conservatives appears to have aimed at exactly the kind of conclusion that *Le Monde* made: Ligachev is "un peu plus que le numero deux" – "a little bit more than Number Two." A brazen attack on political relaxation, the *Sovetskaya Rossia* piece was rumored to be personally approved by Ligachev and edited by his aides. It prompted a full-page *Pravda* response, written by

1 Vadim Zagladin, First Deputy Chief, International Department of the Central Committee, "The party – the people – socialism," *World Economy and International Relations* 5 (1987), p. 10.

2 *Pravda*, January 13, 1988.

Alexandr Yakovlev, Gorbachev's closest ally in the Politburo and the General Secretary's top advisor on ideological and cultural matters.

The current phase of Gorbachev's reforms is not likely to last beyond mid-May, when the General Secretary resumes the offensive in preparation for June's Extraordinary Party Conference. Note how hard he pushed to have the Afghan accords signed before the Conference. The timing of President Reagan's visit, too, is not an accident, as they say in the Soviet Union.

Internal Contradictions. The utmost seriousness, even gravity, of the Party reformers' commitment to change is underscored by the theoretical apparatus deployed in the wake of the January plenum. For the first time the contradiction between the "production forces" ("the basis") and the "relations of production" ("the superstructure"), which is central to the Marxist analysis of political upheavals in class societies, has been discovered under socialism. The origin of the braking mechanism (*mechanism tormozhenia*) — itself a totally new theoretical concept — is traced by Gorbachev to the absence of "automatic" correlation between the basis and the superstructure. Hence, the political superstructure (*politicheskaya nadstroika*) must be constantly "modified" and "perfected" so as not to fall behind the production forces and become a "serious brake" on the development of the society.³ Therefore, argues one of Gorbachev's top economic advisors, economic restructuring unaccompanied by "serious renovation" in the political, social, and spiritual areas, that is, *perestroika-sans-glasnost'*, is doomed to "choke up" as the Kosygin reform did in the mid-1960s.⁴

The system of socialized ownership of the means of production and of the state-run economy, until recently considered an unmitigated blessing, is now recognized to contain "the potential danger of extreme centralization," which becomes reality in the absence of appropriate counterbalances (*protivovesy*). Useful only under extreme circumstances, such centralization is said to lead to the growth of "bureaucratism" and "social passivity" if adopted as a general norm.⁵ Thus, even before the notorious "immobilism" (*zastoy*) of the late Brezhnev era, the Soviet Union is said to have been through at least two other periods of sharp economic and social downturns: in the late 1930s and at the end of the 1950s.

"Plurality of Interests." Moreover, the absence of private property is no longer equated with the absence of labor conflict. While the Soviet state and the official trade unions may not have any "diversion in principle," "non-antagonistic contradictions" between the economic tasks of the state and the social problems of workers can no longer be ignored.⁶

3 M.S. Gorbachev, *Selected Speeches and Articles* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1987), vol. 3, p. 218. See also: Leonid Abalkin, "Supported by the lessons of the past," *Kommunist*, November 1987, p. 14.

4 Abalkin, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

5 *Ibid.*

6 Marat Baglay, "Perestroika and trade-unions," *Kommunist*, August 1987, pp. 82-83.

As a result, the official unions are urged to stop being so completely subservient to the managerial power (*upravlencheskaya vlast*) and to "balance" this power — while, all along, working "under party's guidance toward party's goals."⁷

Finally, and again in a startling departure from the accepted views, the superstructure of a "developed socialism" is now said to be given not to simplification but to complications. Absence of conflicts and problems is no longer postulated as the feature of the system. Instead, there is now "plurality of interests," and to drive them underground and "shut them up" is to invite a crisis.⁸

Soviet Epistemology. As we turn to examine a strategy inspired by this analysis, the unprecedented fluidity and pragmatism that permeate Gorbachev's game plan become obstacles to our understanding of the General Secretary's blueprint. These days, the official Soviet epistemology, openly modeled on that of the 10th Party Congress at which Lenin inaugurated the New Economic Policy, seems to be compressed into two words: *zhizn pokazhet* (life will show). The General Secretary is never tired of reminding his compatriots that no one has a monopoly on the truth and no one is insured against mistakes.

At the same time, the extent of the flux should not be exaggerated. To continue the 10th congress parallel, the preservation of the "commanding heights" (*komandnye vysoty*), of which Lenin assured his anxious comrades in 1921, will be maintained. In contrast to the Prague Spring of 1968, the debate in the Soviet leadership is not about the principle of keeping these heights in the hands of the Party, but about how much they will tower over the society. At least for now, none of the key structures of classic totalitarianism appears to be in any danger in Gorbachev's Soviet Union: a monopolistic official ideology; the single mass Party; terroristic police control; near complete monopoly of the means of mass communication; total monopoly on the means of armed combat; and central control of the economy.⁹

Limits on Terror. Yet it is clear that Soviet totalitarianism is completing a passage to a qualitatively different stage. Begun by Stalin's death and evolving, by fits and starts, under Khrushchev and Brezhnev, this process is fueled by the realization that the viability of the state, especially its material well-being and military capability, can no longer be sustained by terroristic mobilization only. It now requires for its maintenance the evolution of its still nearly absolute control over the civil society toward a mode that is less redundant, less excessive and counterproductive, more enlightened, if you will.

In the Soviet political history, the experimentation on and with the margins of safety that attends this evolution is not, of course, Gorbachev's monopoly. For all the General Secretary's desire to arrogate for himself the laurels of a pioneer, he is presiding over a

7 *Ibid.*

8 Oleg Bogomolov, "The world of socialism on the road of perestroika," *Kommunist*, November 1987, p. 98.

9 C.F. Friedrich and Z.K. Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1956), pp. 9-10.

process that was well underway by the time he came to power. The gradual, deliberate, always reversible lowering of the "commanding heights" and doling out vestiges of security and autonomy to select segments and institutions of the society have been fixtures of Soviet politics for the last thirty years. The most important of such concessions was Khrushchev's limitations on the scope and arbitrariness of terror — a byproduct of the elimination of intra-Party violence. And for all Gorbachev's stridency in trying to legitimize himself by dissociation from former boss Leonid Brezhnev, he is an heir to a very useful legacy. It includes periodic attempts to change the structural priorities of resource allocation in the direction of consumption, attention to agriculture, perception of food shortage as a political problem, and an unprecedented openness to the West. (Unprecedented, of course, by the Soviet standards.) Perhaps most important, by gradually relaxing, after the initial assault, sanctions against quiet and apolitical nonconformism and boosting the prestige and autonomy of the professional intelligentsia, Brezhnev reared both the generals and the foot soldiers of *perestroika*.

Preserving Key Party Functions. After a year of linguistic experimentation, an official term for Gorbachev's vision of the Soviet polity seems to be emerging. It is "socialist pluralism," the term to which the General Secretary himself finally gave an imprimatur at the latest Central Committee meeting in February of this year.¹⁰ This denomination is chosen with great care to distinguish it not only from the bugbear of "bourgeois pluralism" but also from "socialist democracy" that was utterly discredited under Brezhnev. Here is how a top Soviet expert on Eastern Europe explains the choice:

Pluralism is often understood as one of the characteristics of the bourgeois society. Yet in recent years scholars and politicians in the fraternal countries have been trying to locate constructive content of the real plurality of interests, opinions and positions, to reflect them more broadly in the means of mass communication, in the political system....¹¹

"Fraternal countries" in this quotation are Poland, Hungary, and Yugoslavia, whose experience in political liberalization is cited by the reformers with increased frequency as a proof that the margins of safety can be expanded significantly without the loss of the commanding heights. Soviet proponents of the model hasten to add,

Socialist pluralism is not the notorious 'free play' of political forces but an expansion of the platform of national unity under the leading role of the party. It is instructive that nowhere has [socialist pluralism] undermined the foundations of socio-political order....¹²

10 *Pravda*, February 19, 1988.

11 Bogomolov, *op. cit.*, p. 99. Academician Oleg Bogomolov is Director of the Institute of the Economy of the World Socialist System.

12 *Ibid.*

According to admittedly sympathetic and less than objective Soviet observers, socialist pluralism preserves the key functions of the Party: the custody of ideology and upbringing (*ideyno-vospitatelnaya rabota*); maintenance of the appropriate "moral-ideological climate"; policy planning ("development of policies in accordance with party principles"); and control over cadres.¹³

The last two items are of crucial importance. Detailing his vision of socialist pluralism in the most extensive statement so far, Gorbachev told the a Central Committee plenum last February:

The directing and leading role of the party is the necessary condition of the functioning and development of the socialist society. The party develops and adjusts policy...[and] conducts the fitting personnel policy. These are, in short, the main functions of the party as the political vanguard of the society.¹⁴

Two Pillars. Thus, two principles emerge as sacrosanct pillars of socialist pluralism: a policy making, in which the Party has the ultimate say, and the system of *nomenklatura*, in which every appointment of significance — from the school principal, hospital director, and orchestra conductor to the college dean, plant manager and newspaper editor — is cleared by a Party body on the corresponding level. They are the two "commanding heights" the Party will not allow to be lowered, let alone shared with the civil society.

Under socialist pluralism, the civil society is no longer viewed by the state as a barely tolerated suspect — it becomes something of a very junior coalition partner without the voting rights. The state grants limited autonomy, a kind of home rule, to select segments and institutions of civil society, at the same time explicitly declaring some areas off-limits in their charters. The extreme care with which the recipients of such favors are chosen as well as the possibility of home rule's being revoked on a moment's notice are among the key characteristics that distinguish socialist pluralism from authoritarian rule.

Party in the Vanguard. In Hungary and Poland, independent organizations are seen by Soviet observers as "participating in a dialogue" with the "ruling" party, recognizing and respecting the constitutional principles, i.e., the dominance of the Communist Party. Such civil associations "offer" alternative views and defend their rights — again, "within the constitution."¹⁵ In short, as a *Kommunist* editorial puts it, while remaining "in the vanguard," the Party is engaged in a "constructive dialogue with the masses."¹⁶ The rules of this dialogue became clearer last May when the law on referendums was published in the Soviet Union. Originally the draft contained a provision on "nationwide vote." The

13 Bogomolov, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

14 *Pravda*, February 19, 1988, p. 3.

15 Bogomolov, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

16 *Kommunist*, January 1988, p. 7.

published version made no mention of voting and was the version adopted by the Supreme Soviet.

At the meeting with writers and editors last summer, Gorbachev told a short story, which is worth quoting verbatim because it is an excellent illustration of Gorbachev's vision of the Party's role under socialist pluralism:

When passions flared at a meeting of a directorate of the Union of Russian Writers, I sent a message to the comrades that we would be very concerned if suddenly, instead of consolidation of our creative intelligentsia, there were a brawl, so to speak....Even the sharpest questions have to be discussed respecting each other....We still lack political culture, culture to conduct a discussion, to respect an opinion of your friend, your comrade.¹⁷

Monopoly on Strategy. This is vintage Gorbachev. Here, the paradigm of socialist pluralism leaps alive: having arrogated to itself a monopoly on strategy, the Party is not only willing to tolerate debates about tactics but serves as a mediator between loyal followers, a kind of impartial and benevolent guarantor of the civility of debate.

Which social groups and institutions will be most immediately affected by the policies of socialist pluralism? The intelligentsia stands to gain the most, and judging by the support it lends to the General Secretary, understands this very well. To begin, as in Yugoslavia, Poland, and Hungary, Soviet intelligentsia will be the most direct beneficiary of the relaxation of the cultural border controls that socialist pluralism will entail: easier travel abroad, especially to the West, freer access to Western cultural goods, greater opportunity for meeting Western colleagues.

Boundaries of the Permissible. Furthermore, the emancipation of professional intelligentsia from day-to-day, petty political supervision, well advanced under Brezhnev, now appears to be extended to creative intelligentsia as well. The Soviet state is discovering what the Hungarian authorities realized two decades ago: once the boundaries of the permissible have been internalized, there is no longer the need for terrorizing the artist. In the words of Hungarian dissident Miklos Haraszti, who studied cultural policies of social pluralism, "the state need not enforce obedience when everyone has learned to police himself."¹⁸ Under such circumstances, according to Haraszti, "politically neutral" art no longer constitutes a threat to the state because it does not lead to a "braver culture."

To be sure, the Polish example shows that this policy could produce a different result, one more troubling to the state. Yet both Gorbachev and his top advisor on ideological and cultural matters, the architect of *glasnost*' Alexandr Yakovlev, are well aware of the two factors that make Poland distinct: a powerful church, which represents, legitimizes, and consolidates alternative moral and cultural values; and the link between the blue collar

¹⁷ *Kommunist*, August 1987, p. 5.

¹⁸ Miklos Haraszti, *The Velvet Prison: Artists under State Socialism* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

