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GORBACHEV'S "GLASNOST": ANOTHER POTEMKIN VILLAGE?

INTRODUCTION

Soviet Communist Party General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost' campaign raises important questions about the direction of the Soviet system. Is it genuine, or is it a sophisticated effort to disarm domestic and foreign opponents without any fundamental change? Glasnost' literally means "openness" and more generally is used by Gorbachev to describe what he claims is his plan for reinvigorating the Soviet state and society. Glasnost' ostensibly involves greater frankness about Soviet social ills in the mass media, greater criticism of corrupt and inept officials, selective releases of prisoners of conscience, a cultural "thaw," and promises of "democratization" of the Soviet political system.

The new Soviet leaders would like the West to believe that their society already has changed drastically and for the West to respond by abandoning its generally tough and suspicious policy of dealing with Moscow. So far, however, glasnost' has done nothing to warrant changing the basic tenor of Soviet-American relations. In the past, Soviet leaders launched similar campaigns for domestic relaxation to purge the party and government of their opponents and to try to tap the creative resources of their society. Once the consolidation of power was completed and the society somewhat revitalized, the Kremlin would return to repression to safeguard the Communist Party's monopoly of power.

Since Ronald Reagan became President in 1981, his critics have maintained that his policy of peace through strength toward the Kremlin would strengthen the hands of "hardliners" inside the Soviet Union. Gorbachev's glasnost' campaign proves these critics wrong. Having met a firm American response to their expansionism and military build-up, confronted with open American criticism of their massive violations of human rights, the new team of Soviet leaders apparently

decided that without revitalizing their society and improving their tarnished image the Soviet Union would lose its superpower status.

Not until the average Soviet citizen is empowered to influence the Kremlin's international conduct, however, will the Soviet Union cease to be a predictably destabilizing factor in international relations. Not until there are substantial changes in the Soviet political system can the Soviet Union become a reliable partner. So far, there are no indications that Gorbachev seeks these changes. What he is changing is the Soviet operational style.

The Russians, after all, invented the Potemkin Village, the device used by Prince Grigoriy Potemkin during the reign of Catherine the Great in the 18th century to convince the Empress, who prided herself on her enlightened views and corresponded with such great sages of the French Enlightenment as Voltaire and Diderot, that Russia was an advanced, changing society. Along Catherine's travel route, Potemkin erected sparkling new facades to hide the squalor of impoverished Russian villages. Since then, the Russians have mastered the art of deceiving the outside world. The question for the West is whether Gorbachev's glasnost is yet simply another Potemkin village, a sparkling facade that hides the true nature of the Soviet state.

To expect the Soviet Union, after seven decades of Bolshevik rule, to transform itself into a full-fledged democracy is unrealistic. But there are a number of important steps that Gorbachev could take toward that goal, which would give the West greater confidence that he is sincere about reforming the Soviet Union. Westerners should use these steps as a kind of litmus test of the evolution of glasnost'.

The steps include:

- 1) restoration of the right to form factions in the Communist Party on the basis of varying ideological platforms;
- 2) an end to the persecution of individuals for expressing their ideas and religious beliefs;
- 3) an end to the severe limitations on Soviet citizens' right to travel abroad;
- 4) an end to the jamming of foreign broadcasts;
- 5) publication of books critical of Soviet communism as a system; and
- 6) an end of the government monopoly on publishing.

Without such changes, Gorbachev's glasnost' campaign will remain only another Russian Potemkin village. With these steps, Gorbachev can begin to change Soviet history profoundly.

PRECEDENTS OF GLASNOST'

Gorbachev's campaign for glasnost' combines features from various phases of the 70 years of Soviet political history.¹

Vladimir Lenin, the founder of the Soviet state, used the term glasnost' in 1919, while looking for the means to rein in the communist bureaucracy he himself had created.² From 1921 to 1927, the Communist Party, led by Lenin's successors (after his death in 1924), retreated from the extremist economic and cultural policies of the first years of the Soviet regime. The purpose of this glasnost' was to create a breathing spell for the society exhausted by the Russian civil war (1918-1921). These policies included condoning some free market activities, allowing the existence of various art groups and private publishing houses, as well as reducing the use of political terror. Once the Soviet economy and society had recovered somewhat from the revolutionary excesses, Stalin launched his political terror to strengthen his personal power and that of the Communist Party.

After the German attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, Stalin, gripped by panic, addressed his subjects in a speech as "brothers and sisters" and somewhat relaxed his policies of oppression. The Russian Orthodox Church was allowed to reopen some of its churches. The great Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, vilified before the war, was invited to publish one of her patriotic poems in the Communist Party daily Pravda. Once the war was won, however, the clock was set back: terror resumed, and the cultural climate was frozen, with Anna Akhmatova again vilified for her "decadent" verse.

Nikita Khrushchev, the leader of the Soviet Union from 1953 to 1964, used criticism of Stalin and of the Soviet secret police to

1. The pattern of periods of liberalization followed by return to repression can be traced even in pre-Revolutionary Russian history: the liberal early years of Tsar Alexander I in the beginning of the 19th century were followed by increased repression in the last years of his rule and throughout the rule of his successor, Nicholas I; after the latter's death in 1855, Alexander II instituted quite radical reforms, including abolition of serfdom and trial by jury, but the later years of his rule, as well as the rule of his successors, Alexander III and Nicholas II, had a distinctly reactionary flavor.

2. Cited in Radio Liberty Research Bulletin, 1987, No. 14.

weaken his opponents, and he permitted a considerable cultural thaw (including publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's writings depicting life in Stalin's prison camps) to overcome the spiritual and political stagnation that had settled in Soviet society during Stalin's rule. Khrushchev himself publicly criticized Stalin's terror and the atrocities committed by the secret police under Stalin. Khrushchev disclosed to the public (albeit in a self-serving version) some events that had occurred in the Politburo and allowed the presence of nonmembers at usually closed meetings of the Central Committee. He criss-crossed the Soviet Union and the world, pumping hands, making speeches, arguing in an attempt to demonstrate his "open" style of government and to distinguish himself from the secretive, paranoid Stalin. Khrushchev alternated between brief periods of relaxation and lapses into more repressive policies until he was deposed in 1964 by his fellow oligarchs, worried that Khrushchev was weakening the authority of the Communist Party.

GORBACHEV'S GOALS

Gorbachev intends to use glasnost' to achieve certain political goals.

Weakening Opponents

The policy of glasnost' encourages, with some significant exceptions (to be discussed below), criticism of Party officials for incompetence and abuses of power. This includes even such high officials as Ministers of the Soviet Union, Secretaries of the Central Committees of the Communist Party in the Union Republics, Communist Party officials at the provincial, city, and borough levels. This helps Gorbachev to rid the Party and government machinery of late Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev's "old guard" and to replace them with Gorbachev appointees.

Example: Dinmukhammed Kunaev, the former Communist Party leader in the Central Asian republic of Kazakhstan and member of the ruling Politburo was fired from both posts this December and January, respectively, following nearly two years of a mass media campaign against the corruption and economic failures in Kazakhstan. Currently a similar campaign is being waged against economic shortcomings and abuses of power in the Ukraine. There the obvious target is the last Brezhnevite in the Politburo, Ukrainian Communist Party leader Vladimir Shcherbitsky.³

3. While Politburo members Andrei Gromyko (aged 77) and Mikhail Solomentsev (aged 74) belong to Brezhnev's generation, they obviously have cast their lot with Gorbachev.

Controlling the Bureaucracy

Gorbachev is trying to use mass media criticism as a substitute for the nonexistent political opposition to prevent the bureaucrats from pursuing their self-interest rather than their duties.⁴

Example: When the Communist Party officials in the Ukrainian city of Voroshilovgrad used the local KGB, the secret police, to silence the criticisms of their failures by a correspondent of the Communist Party daily Pravda, KGB boss Viktor Chebrikov printed a story about his order to fire the Voroshilovgrad KGB chief on the first page of Pravda. This was a gesture unheard of since Khrushchev's days.

Overcoming Alienation between the People and the Regime

A stream of mass media reports has been revealing major deficiencies in Soviet social life. These include drunkenness, corruption, widespread abuses by law enforcement agencies, woefully inadequate health care, shortages of food and consumer goods, the spread of drug addiction, inadequacies of the educational system, nearly complete lack of decent care for retarded children, inadequate provision for old-age pensioners and families with many children. After decades of official silence on these issues, Gorbachev apparently hopes that glasnost' will reverse the alienation of the people from the regime and make the average citizen believe that by working harder he can contribute to his own well-being. Gorbachev said recently that material benefits from his economic policies cannot be expected in the near future. Thus, he can only hope that the glasnost' will awaken the people's enthusiasm and improve their notoriously poor work ethic⁵

Winning the Support of the Intelligentsia

The spiritual stagnation of Soviet society has had a profound impact on its best educated and most creative members: scientists, artists, writers, educators. The more outspoken members of the intelligentsia, such as writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Vassily Aksyonov, theater director Yuri Lyubimov, film director Andrei Tarkovsky, musician Mstislav Rostropovich, and many others have been forced to leave the Soviet Union; many more simply lost hope for any improvement and thus lost interest in the public good. The Soviet

4. Gorbachev made these remarks at a meeting with members of the Union of Soviet Writers on June 19, 1986; they were not published in the Soviet Union, but notes of the meeting taken by one of the participants, were later published in the West. See Novoe russkoe slovo, November 19, 1986.

5. See Pravda, February 20, 1987.

leadership needs to mobilize the country's intelligentsia and their creative potential.⁶ What the intelligentsia want is greater freedom of expression and less heavy-handed treatment by the Communist Party.

Gorbachev has made several gestures toward the intelligentsia. A somewhat greater artistic freedom is now permitted, allowing some leeway for expression of political views. Example: Release of the film Repentance, a symbolic and powerful tale of Stalin's terror.

Open criticism of Communist Party bureaucrats' incompetence, meanwhile, is meant to raise hope among the intelligentsia that their opinions would be more valued by Gorbachev's regime than by its predecessors. The recent releases of political prisoners, although primarily to impress the West, also were meant for the intelligentsia. This is especially true of Gorbachev's telephone call to Dr. Andrei Sakharov announcing his release from exile: as far as the West was concerned, it would have been enough simply to release Sakharov, but Gorbachev's gesture was apparently intended to signal his desire to end complete alienation between the intelligentsia and Brezhnev's Party leadership.

Exporting Glasnost'

The glasnost' campaign plays an important role in the Soviet public relations offensive in the West. This was explicitly admitted by one of the regime's most visible spokesmen, Georgiy Arbatov, the Director of the USA and Canada Institute. He told the January 1987 meeting of the Central Committee of the Communist Party that it was necessary to continue publishing materials sharply critical of Soviet domestic problems to convince the West that the changes introduced by Gorbachev are serious and genuine.⁷ A prominent Soviet publicist, Fedor Burlatskiy, noted that the release of Andrei Sakharov from exile was welcomed "by the progressive circles" (a Soviet umbrella term for political forces ranging from radical left to "peace" movements to liberals) in the West.⁸ And, notes Peter Reddaway, the Secretary of the Woodrow Wilson Center's Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies in Washington: "the biggest prize of all--Mr. Sakharov's critical attitude towards President Reagan's SDI can now be exploited

6. See Peter Reddaway, "Mr. Gorbachev's Gambit," The New Republic, February 3, 1987.

7. Vladimir Karpov, "Deystvovat! Deystvovat' tvorcheski!" Literaturnaya gazeta, February 4, 1987.

8. Fedor Burlatskiy, "Chego zhe vse-taki khochet Amerika?" Literaturnaya gazeta, January 14, 1987.

by the Soviet leadership to lend authority to its many-pronged campaign to kill this project."⁹

The release of 150 political prisoners was actively discussed by Soviet spokesmen with Western reporters, but greeted with silence inside the Soviet Union. By far the sharpest criticism of Soviet reality have been published by Moscow News, a newspaper printed in Russian and four foreign languages and circulated primarily abroad. Moscow News printed the first and only account in the Soviet press of violations of the rights of religious believers in the USSR. It published a positive review of the film Repentance more than a month before Soviet domestic newspapers. Moscow News described Leon Trotsky as one of the successors to Lenin, albeit an unworthy one, while the rest of the Soviet press continues the established tradition of not mentioning the two names together; moreover, it implicitly deplored the fact that Stalin had succeeded Lenin. Another publication primarily for foreign readership, New Times (published in eight foreign languages as well as in Russian), criticized Leonid Brezhnev by name--boldness not yet approached by the Soviet domestic press.¹⁰

LIMITATIONS OF GLASNOST'

Lack Of Institutional Change

The greatest limitation of the glasnost' campaign is that it is rooted in the policies of one man, Gorbachev, and his several allies in the top echelons of the Communist Party. Gorbachev's call for competitive elections by secret ballot in lower-level Communist Party bodies is not a move toward genuine pluralism, but rather a device to ensure a better selection of Party cadres. The competition would be not between different ideological platforms, but simply between more and less personally popular Party candidates. In addition, Gorbachev plans to retain the higher Party bodies' right to veto any candidate elected at the lower level, making an election of a Party official with truly independent views practically impossible.

The top Party leadership thus would be assured of its ultimate control over all aspects of life, and it would be able to reverse the policy of glasnost' at any time since there would be no institutional basis for expression of independent views.

9. Reddaway, op.cit.

10. Radio Liberty Research Bulletin, 1987, No.54, p. 4; Yegor Yakovlev, "Farewell," Moscow News, January 18, 1987; Alexander Bovin, "Memory: A Factor to be Set in Motion," New Times, 1987, No. 5, pp. 9, 10.

No Real Weight to Public Opinion

Thus far, the ability of the Soviet public to influence the decisions of the bureaucracy is questionable at best. The recent decision to scrap the project that would have reversed the flow of the great northern rivers in the European and Siberian parts of the Soviet Union for irrigation purposes is often cited by the regime as an example of its bowing to public pressure. But an extensive campaign by scientists and cultural figures against this project began a decade ago in the mass media. This means that it was opposed by some even within Leonid Brezhnev's leadership and is not an example of the impact of genuinely independent public opinion on government policy.

Repression of Dissidents

The announced release last month of 150 dissidents from Soviet prisons does not mean an end to the repression of those seeking freedom of expression, religion, and emigration. Indeed, glasnost' last month did not prevent a mob of men, who appeared to be KGB agents, from savagely beating demonstrators in Moscow demanding freedom for Jewish dissident Joseph Begun. It is possible that Gorbachev could begin using the Polish model of repression, harassing dissenters constantly by loss of employment, short-term detentions, and fines. This would soften the Kremlin's image of brutality, while still effectively preventing the creation of any large-scale organized opposition.

The new law on emigration effectively bans free movement of people across the Soviet border by limiting nongovernmental travel, which includes official tourism, to those with immediate relatives abroad and giving the government broad powers to deny travel visas on vaguely defined grounds.

Jamming Western Broadcasts

The Soviet mass media recently have carried short articles by, or interviews with, Senate Minority Leader Robert Dole, former U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Jeane Kirkpatrick, Director of Arms Control and Disarmament Agency Kenneth Adelman, Harvard Sovietologist Professor Richard Pipes, and other prominent American critics of Soviet policies. While this is an improvement, it is not unprecedented: On April 16, 1953, after Stalin's death, the new Soviet leaders sought to improve U.S.-Soviet relations by allowing Soviet newspapers to print a speech by President Dwight Eisenhower.¹¹ The impact of such publications is quite limited. The average Soviet citizen, subject for decades to propagandistic distortions of reality outside the

11. Mikhail Heller and Aleksandr Nekrich, Utopia in Power (New York: Summit Books, 1986), p. 519.

Soviet borders and unable to travel to the West, is not swayed by a short statement of alternative views, always accompanied by a Soviet rebuttal, usually longer than the original contribution.

The Soviets thus far are determined to prevent an uninterrupted flow of information into the Soviet Union. While they have stopped jamming Russian language broadcasts of the BBC, they continue to block broadcasts of the Voice of America in the languages of the peoples of the Soviet Union and actually have intensified jamming of Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe broadcasts.

Propaganda of Hate Toward America

While the Soviets have loudly denounced February's ABC miniseries Amerika as "hate-mongering," Soviet mass media continue to pump out massive doses of disinformation designed to incite hatred toward the United States. Example: Soviet government-run newspapers "report" that the AIDS virus was developed for biological warfare purposes by the U.S. government.¹² Example: The Soviet journal New Times reported that Jessica Savitch, the NBC-TV newswoman killed in a 1983 auto accident, was "murdered" by "CIA agents" and American "Zionists" for narrating a documentary portraying unhappy Soviet emigres in the U.S.¹³ Example: The Soviet government daily Izvestiya in January accused the U.S. government of murdering 918 members of the People's Temple in Guyana (who in reality committed mass suicide) in 1978 to prevent them from immigrating to the Soviet Union.¹⁴

No Glasnost' on National Security Issues

The glasnost' campaign has not spread to the issues of Soviet international conduct. The Soviet citizen is still kept in the dark about the real size of the Kremlin's defense spending. No criticism of current Soviet foreign policy is permitted in the mass media. The Soviet forces in Afghanistan are portrayed as saviors of the Afghan people, not invaders. Soviet brutalities in Afghanistan, confirmed by the United Nations and Amnesty International, are summarily denied.

12. See Literaturnaya gazeta, October 30, 1985, p. 14.

13. Boris Antonov, "Who Killed Jessica Savitch," New Times, 1985, No.37, pp. 28-30.

14. Andrei Itskov, SShA: 918 zhertv politicheskogo terrora," Izvestiya, January 30, 1987.

A CHECKLIST FOR GENUINE GLASNOST'

Genuine glasnost' could lead to profound changes in U.S.-Soviet relations. The test of such glasnost' is: It could be considered a real change in Soviet-American relations only if and when Soviet citizens obtained the ability to influence the Kremlin's international conduct. The first steps in this direction would be:

1) Abolition of the 1921 resolution "On Party Unity," adopted by the 10th Congress of the Communist Party, banning formation of factions in the Party. Within the framework of a one-party system (barring the extremely unlikely emergence of a multiparty system in the USSR), only permission to establish factions with varying ideological platforms within the Communist Party itself can provide a genuine foundation for a modest freedom of political debate.

2) An end to harassment of Soviet citizens for criticizing Communist Party policies. Abolition of the USSR Criminal Code Articles 70 and 190, which deal with "anti-Soviet propaganda" would be a sign of genuine change if new Criminal Code articles did not replace them, or if other means of harassing dissenters were not employed (for instance, imprisonment of dissidents on fake criminal charges, beatings by "unknown" thugs, and denial of jobs).

3) Release of all prisoners of conscience from prison and exile.

4) A thorough reform of the Soviet judicial system, including trial by jury, which should be independent of the judge, and the right of citizens to sue government officials. The idea of trial by jury has been floated in the Soviet press, and the right to sue government officials is in theory provided by Article 58 of the Soviet Constitution, but there is no actual law for its implementation.¹⁵

5) Cessation of the jamming of all foreign broadcasting in the languages of the Soviet peoples.

6) Significant relaxation of restrictions on foreign travel for emigration, family reunification, and family visits, as well as for professional purposes and tourism.

7) Publication of literary works at odds with the communist orthodoxy, such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's Gulag Archipelago and Vasily Grossman's Everything Flows and Life and Fate.

15. See "Pravo sudit'," Literaturnaya gazeta, January 21, 1987, p.12.

8) Ending the government monopoly on publishing. Under the New Economic Policy in the 1920s, publishing cooperatives were allowed to operate. Currently, the Kremlin is moving toward permitting some nongovernment cooperative activity in certain services. This move could be broadened to include publishing activity.

CONCLUSION

Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost' campaign thus far has only scratched the surface of the Soviet totalitarian system. It may be no more permanent than previous Soviet flirtations with reform, or it may be nothing more than another Potemkin Village. The Kremlin is trying hard to convince the West that these few tentative steps toward a more open society indicate a fundamental change in the character of the Soviet political system. From this Moscow hopes to obtain a "softer" Western line in arms control negotiations and relaxation of controls on the export of modern technology to the Soviet Union.

The Reagan Administration's policy of peace through strength has worked. It has prodded Soviet concessions on arms control, and it certainly has not prevented (and probably has encouraged) Gorbachev's glasnost' policy. As glasnost' unfolds, therefore, the U.S. should continue to pursue those policies that have led to these recent heartening developments.

Soviet history teaches that periods of relaxation always have been followed by a return to repression. Only changes empowering Soviet citizens to affect the Kremlin's international conduct, such as freedom of political debate, should permit the U.S. to revise its hard-learned methods of dealing with the Soviets. It is too early to know whether such changes are coming. Until they actually take place, the United States should continue Reagan's realistic and successful policies rather than engage in a dangerous chase of illusory hopes.

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