

Reflections On Perestroika

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Ten years ago Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev was chosen general secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. This event traditionally marks the beginning of changes that became known as *perestroika*. Our people have a different attitude toward it. Some consider it to be a necessary, or at least historically unavoidable enterprise, even though it brought quite different results from those that had been expected. Others, on the other hand, condemn perestroika and consider it to be the work of the devil, who decided by means of it to destroy the people and the country. Its founders are regarded as traitors and foreign "agents of influence."

According to Hegel, it is an error to consider that the truth lies between two opposite points of view; in reality, what lies between them is the problem. Whether perestroika has been a blessing or a misfortune, or to some extent both, will become clear in two or three decades. According to a poet, the great can be seen only from a distance. In 1927, during the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution, it was also not easy, if not impossible, to give true value to this great event. Even today it is heatedly argued whether the October Revolution contributed to a rapid and strong development of our country or, on the contrary, pushed it from the main road to a lateral road leading to a dead-end.

Should we wait until time separates the truth from impurities and gives a comprehensive answer to the question about the meaning of perestroika and determines the role its founders played? Were they villains or benefactors of the Motherland or, perhaps, just common people who meant well, but could not defeat the circumstances? The young people may live until this moment, but the country, the society as a whole, has a vital necessity to define right now its attitude toward a recent past. Without this, it is impossible to draw lessons from this experience, or to make the correct choice of programs, parties, or leaders capable of giving the country effective leadership. It is not a coincidence that perestroika has become the theme of political struggle, and its tenth anniversary the natural ground for heated polemics.

The main point of discussion questions the necessity of perestroika in general. This question seems to be scholastic. One can cast doubts on any political event with the same rate of success: Was it necessary or could one have done without it? Perestroika has already taken place, and it is impossible to change the past. It is a lot more important to understand why the changes, which have been undertaken to overcome the stagnation, to give socialism a facelift, to improve the level of life of the people, have turned into a deep economic and political crisis; into something that has not happened in Russia since the times of the Polish invasion and *samozvaniets*;

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into hundreds of thousands of refugees left homeless; into millions of Russians or Russian-speaking people who suddenly became second-class citizens in former Soviet republics, now independent countries of the Commonwealth; and, finally, into everlasting conflicts in which the blood of innocent people and young boys in military uniform is being shed. But before searching for the answer to this question it is necessary to answer the other two, which are of no less importance.

Whose Deed Was Perestroika?

What kind of question is this? the majority of the readers will remark. It was Gorbachev's creation, of course, and perhaps of the group of his closest collaborators, or his team, as it commonly

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Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev was the founder and, if it is possible to apply the term, “demiurge,” creator of perestroika. If at the March 1985 Plenum of the Central Committee of the CPSU Viktor Grishin or Grigory Romanov were

chosen as general secretary our life would have continued the old way. Gorbachev, if we try to define his activity, has become the second leader of our century, who after Lenin, turned Russia upside down and gave the new course to the whole process of the development of the world.¹

It is true that Gorbachev is the architect of perestroika. But he created only half of it. The other half consists of the fact that we have to recognize as participants and co-founders of the reforms our whole society. Changes were accepted with unusual enthusiasm by almost all strata of society. During the three decades that the country was bearing the reforms, it was pregnant with them, and when at last the delivery took place, it aroused general excitement and hope. Gorbachev did not make a single decision unilaterally; all of them were approved by the Politburo and Central Committee plenums, the Nineteenth Party Conference, and the Twenty-Seventh and Twenty-Eighth Party Congresses. Such fundamental reforms as the introduction of a multi-party system or private property were the result of expression of the will of freely elected people's deputies of the USSR and the Supreme Soviet and their legislative acts. Practically every step of perestroika was taken after profound discussions by the leading scientific institutions, press, and, in the most important cases, all-Union polls.

But if until August 1991 perestroika can be considered the product of the whole society led by Gorbachev, after that fatal date the founder of the reforms has practically become powerless. The course of events was determined by another leader and another team who were able to attract the politically active part of the population. Miners, who by means of their demonstrations against the Soviet government in 1989 and 1990 prepared the ground for its fall. Journalists, who organized a fierce campaign against Gorbachev, blaming him, on one hand, for the intention to undermine the foundations of socialism, and on the other, for lack of desire to carry out really deep reforms. Russian deputies, who chose Yeltsin at the elections for chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Russia, and later on, the voters who chose him as their president. Deputies, who ratified the Belovezhsky Forest

agreements and authorized him to implement "shock therapy." Republican leaders, who, together with him, broke the Union into pieces.

To affirm that Gorbachev alone or Yeltsin alone is responsible for everything that happened during the decade of 1985-1995 is an example of narrow-mindedness.

And another premise: the reforms that took place between 1985-1991 had a deep (structural, according to the definition of sociologists) character, but did not have the purpose of neglecting the principles of socialism.

Stalin's Constitution of 1936 proclaimed free elections, freedom of expression, press, gatherings, meetings, demonstrations, religion, et cetera—practically the whole range of democratic institutions that are now recognized all over the world. We declared the principles of human rights, and Gorbachev's political reform, at least at its first stage, concentrated on the intent to abolish the monstrous abyss between the word and deed, theory and practice, law and life. And its outcome serves as an undeniable proof of defects of the existing system. This system could only exist based on lies and double standards. Therefore, it was doomed to self-destruction. This predetermined the lack of success of the attempts to rebuild it.

Stages of Perestroika

Now we will try to define the main stages of perestroika. This will help us to understand how this process began and ended.

The period between March 1985 and June 1988 became the epoch of search and preparation of perestroika. Literally, it may be called the *romantic* period. It was the time when people believed that it was possible to improve, to renew, the existing model of socialism relatively easily and quickly, getting rid of the evident ailments of our society. And the promise of reforms was accepted with

rare general enthusiasm. Romanticism of perestroika exhausted itself as soon as it became clear that palliative methods were not enough, that it was necessary to radically solve the

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problems of power, of the system. This formed the main agenda of the Nineteenth Party Conference, which marked the beginning of the most active, creative stage of perestroika. It can be called the *heroic* period, for during the short time between June 1988 and July 1990 free elections took place for the first time in decades, the Parliament was created, freedom of expression and religion were guaranteed, the process of demilitarization was begun. This time coincides with great achievements in external policy, which was called "new political thinking" (*novoe myshlenie*). The war in Afghanistan was ended, the agreement concerning medium-range missiles was reached with the United States, and initiatives were given in other directions that finally led to the disappearance of the antagonism threatening nuclear apocalypse.

The period of time between the middle of 1990 and the beginning of 1991 deserves to be called *dramatic*. This stage marks the split in the ranks of reformists; the fierce struggle between its moderate wing, headed by Gorbachev, and the radical one, with Yeltsin as its head, burst out. The second front was opened by separatist movements. The third one, by the

conservative group within the party and government leadership. The motor of perestroika—the Union center—was becoming exhausted in this struggle, its energy was falling.

Finally, 1991, without a doubt, marks the *tragic* stage of perestroika. Desperate efforts to save the Union state by means of its transformation were frustrated by the August plot and, later on, by the Belovezhsky Forest agreements.

Perestroika developed according to the laws of the Greek tragedy whose heroes, when they realize the necessity of action, defy destiny, but perish because the fatality and circumstances do not favor them. Perestroika gave impetus to many processes, but was unable or did not have enough time to lead them to their logical conclusion.

So, what happened later on between 1992 and 1995—the continuation of perestroika in its new version, that is, “post-perestroika” or the rupture with it—was a historic process completely different in its contents. Here is the question of great theoretical and political meaning.

There is no doubt that the present period of time is tied to the previous one by a certain continuity. It could be no other way if only for the reason that people who have power now reached it precisely due to the wave of perestroika. Without revolution, Napoleon’s best chance would have been to become a successful military man at the service of King Louis XVI; Yeltsin without perestroika most likely would have ended his career as the first secretary of the Sverdlovsk Regional Committee of the CPSU. And together with people some part of ideas and experience of the immediate past passes form one stage to another.

However, it is even more important that, though affected by corrosion, the main achievements of perestroika have been preserved. We still enjoy

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freedom of expression, even if it is limited. We have a Parliament, even if it does not have any power. We have a Constitutional Court of justice even if it is servile after de facto dispersal of its first body.

And hand-in-hand with continuity goes the split. It is

another project, another policy, methods that are not similar, and at times directly opposite ones.

The ideal of perestroika—the renewal of the USSR along the lines of modern and advanced states, with a market economy, but preserving the positive elements of the socialist system (especially, the concern of the government with education and health services of the population, science and culture, social aid to low-income citizens, and all the needy groups of population—senior citizens, invalids, children, single mothers, inhabitants of the north, etc.). This understanding of internal tasks provides the preservation of the superpower status at the international arena while integrating the country into the economic and political structures of the world.

The ideal of post-perestroika (or counter-perestroika) is the “halved” Russia that threw away the rest of the former republics of the Union as a seemingly unnecessary burden; the formation of capitalist economy based on total privatization; sharp differences in income with the greatest part of the population living below the poverty level; neglect of normal social life;

science and culture, which now have to struggle to survive with their own means. This understanding of internal tasks provides the status of regional power which will be maintained among the advanced ones as it does not have any chance in the foreseeable future to reach the level of the advanced countries according to the economic and social parameters.

I have no intention of affirming, as some of our “leftists” do, that the sad results of post-perestroika were intentionally planned by those who came to power as the result of the Belovezhsky putsch. Their choice surely seemed to them the “wreath of wisdom” and a gift to the peoples of Russia. But policy is judged not by intentions, but by results. And they are pitiful.

And not even for Russia itself. The Western leaders who hope to draw any use out of weakening of Russia and lay their hands on pieces of Soviet inheritance are profoundly mistaken. By driving Russia into a corner, they will open the way to power to nationalist and pro-military forces. And from this point to the revenge and part two of the Cold War there is only one step.

The post-perestroika period of Yeltsin’s regime is nearing its end. The question is, what will replace it. The best for our country and the world would be the return to power of centrally and social-democratically oriented political parties and leaders.

Note

1. It is significant that the same opinion is given even by those who do not approve of Gorbachev. The All-Russia Center for the Study of Social Opinion, Vtsiom, asked a thousand Russian citizens the following question: “In your opinion, who influenced world policy the most during the last fifty years?” Here are the answers expressed in percentages: Gorbachev—25, Stalin—13, Brezhnev—9, Khrushchev—9, Yeltsin—3, Andropov—2, Sakharov—2, Thatcher—1, Reagan—1, Kennedy—1, others—3, hard to answer—31. Source: *Kuranty*, 1 April 1995.