

# Perestroika's Failure to Democratise the Soviet Union

Written by Ingmar Zielke

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## Perestroika's Failure to Democratise the Soviet Union

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INGMAR ZIELKE, JUN 12 2012

*"The dynamic of Soviet Reform always tended towards a transcendence of the system, undermining the very order it was intended to save"* – Sakwa, 1998, p.284

*"Socialist pluralism[...] is carried out within the boundaries of our socialist choice made by our people once and forever in October 1917."* – Gorbachev 1988, in Robinson, p.429

When Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the "committed Communist and follower of Lenin" (Maples, 2004:3), launched *perestroika* soon after his inauguration in 1985, he triggered a breathtaking movement towards the liberalisation[1] of the former Soviet Union. In fact, by 1991 the CPSU had resigned from its central role in society, competitive elections had undermined the "Leninist political dictatorship", the economy had been moderately decentralised, Soviet federalism was facing radical revision, the doctrine of official Marxism-Leninism was falling into decline and de-Stalinization under *glasnost* led to the first blossoms of an open society (Hanson, 2004:531). Yet, why did the Soviet Union collapse before a more democratised system of leadership could be sustainably settled upon? Why could the abolishment of a totalitarian system not lead to a smooth process to democratisation? What triggered the breakdown of a seemingly democratised Soviet Union?

Throughout this essay, I aim to explore the origins, flaws and consequences of *perestroika*. I will therefore argue that Gorbachev's restructuring of the Soviet Union was never designed to create a democratic state[2] that would strongly encourage a multiple party system, a purely democratic society or a free market economy. Next I explore the impacts of *perestroika* on the economy, the political system, and the federal state structure of the Soviet Union. In my conclusion I will analyse the various factors that led to *perestroika's* failure to liberalise and stabilise the Soviet Union.

As mentioned, from the very start of his appointment as the CPSU General Secretary, Gorbachev rejected turning the Soviet Union into a democracy but aimed to preserve a modernised Soviet system (Sakwa, 1998:289). Subsequently, he aimed more to convert the country from a "decayed totalitarian system into an authoritarian" socialist state (p.289) ruled by a single leader and characterised by a restrained government, a weak party, limited political pluralism and non-ideological reason of state (Huntington, 1991:12).

*Perestroika* was first and foremost an economic recovery program (Maples, 2004:27). Mainly triggered through devastating economic performance from 1975 onwards (Sakwa, 1998:282), the 27<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPSU in 1986 marked the start of a movement towards "the revival [...] of the principles of [Lenin's] democratic centralism in running the national economy [and] the introduction of economic methods" (Gorbachev, 1987:pp.18-19). An unsuccessful anti-alcoholism campaign was followed by the insignificant introduction of joint ventures, a semi-liberalised establishment of co-operatives open to severe corruption, and the Law on State Enterprise (Smith, 2005:40-3). Yet, Neo-Stalinist opposition amongst institutionalised ministries and factory management conservatism watered down any serious attempt to significantly reduce the entrenched bureaucracy. In fact, the Law on State Enterprise, despite its original claims, did not lead to a democratisation of the workplace but brought forth a one-man management principle (*samo-upravlenie*) in favour of official functionaries (Christensen, 1990:137). The lacking recovery of the economy directly led to an even more severe economic slowdown[3]. The move towards Lenin's *democratic centralism* and the acceleration of economic development (*uskorenije*) was therefore an unsuccessful attempt to solve the economic decline without "seeming to compromise central planning or the vanguard role of the state"

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(Gooding, 1993:245). In addition, the introduction of a few uncoordinated elements which were characterised by a constant backtracking “in between the discredited command economy and an uninhibited capitalist one [yet, with the rejection of private property and maintained centralised pricing]” (p.255) separated the Gorbachev supporters into conservatives and market liberals; this became abundantly clear from the RSFSRs implementation (and the Soviet Union's rejection) of the Shatalin Plan in 1990.

At the heart of Gorbachev's political reforms lies the Leninist ideal of a mixed economy and a co-operative system supported by popular will (developed through education and enlightenment) with restricted political freedom in which power should be “concentrated in the hands of an enlightened few” (p.237). His inherent emphasis was therefore based on overcoming the “Soviet statism [that] literally swaddled society and [became] a serious brake on [the] initiative of people, social organisations and collectives” (Gorbachev, in Gooding, 1993:248) through a *transformation* (not *rejection*) of the apparatus invoked by a decentralised yet socialist and monopolistic motivation of the state. *Perestroika* was therefore first limited to the exchanges of highly ranked Politburo members, yet neglected the corrupt *nomenklatura* which was deeply rooted throughout the Soviet *apparatchik*[4]. Aware of the limited success, the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Conference in 1988 then marked the cornerstone of an elementary recasting of the political institutions. Yet the “ad-hoc and uncoordinated” (Smith, 2005:52) introduction of the Congress of People's Deputies, the amendment of Article 6 and the new office of a president of the Soviet Union resulted in “more confusion and competition for authority” leading to a paralysis at the governmental level and lacked the signs of a real approach to democratisation (Robinson, 1992:432).

Throughout the *single-party elections* for the new legislature in March 1989, it became clear that the flawed electoral system circumvented the democratic selection of the party deputies since it was the “best established organisation at all levels” (p.432). Despite some surprising outcomes, 87 per cent of the elected congress members belonged to the CPSU, not to mention the upper echelons of the apparatus from which the deputies were drawn (p.432). Such favouritism consequently triggered the further radicalisation of the liberals, creating an Inter-Regional Group of Deputies within the congress demanding further democratic commitments from Gorbachev. Supported by *glasnost* and hence with overwhelming media presence, this group devastatingly undermined Gorbachev's claim for a ‘socialist pluralism of opinions’ but instead brought institutionalised opposition (which also emerged “from the intelligentsia-led public opinion” (Gooding, 1993:251)) and hence revealed the ineffectiveness of a renewal of socialism. Moreover, the obvious failure to obtain consensus “left the USSR in a state of flux” (Robinson, 1992:433). So did the amendment of Article 6 in 1990, a direct result of the incompatibility of the radically monopolistic and ideological role of the *weltanschauungspartei* (Max Weber) CPSU and a democratised political centralism. Here again, reform was based on an ambiguous attempt to maintain socialism through the party retaining its monopolistic role in a one party-system coupled with power over the military while de-ideologising the party and the motivation of state at the same time. By dispossessing the party of its claim to omnipotence it remained questionable as to how – particularly under *glasnost* – a corrupt, inefficient and suppressive party apparatus based on the repression of any freedom of opinion, which was until the very end ‘guaranteed’ by the KGB, could be legitimised. If the party is not always right, why should “the stateless utopia” (Brown, 2004:492) of communism be further pursued? On what grounds then is the enforcement of socialist state authoritarianism legitimised? Without such ideological legitimisation, Gorbachev's inauguration by the legislature (not by the people) to become the Soviet Union's president in March 1990 not only appeared undemocratic, it also hindered him in preceding with further reforms as he was still constrained with a conservative party lacking any program along with the preservation of the *status quo* (Robinson, 1992:pp.438).

*Glasnost*, introduced for dismantling entrenched structures, and through (inter-)national pressure related to the Chernobyl disaster (Smith, 2005:57) proved to be an accelerator of separatist movements amongst the “ethno-federal state structure”, in contrast to China, without a national identity (Sakwa, 1998:279). A de-Stalinization could only trigger fierce secession movements in the Baltics, Moldavia, parts of the Ukraine and of ethnic minorities within the RSFSR after their forced incorporation and mass deportation under Stalin. Even more damaging to the unity of the Soviet Union was Russia's declaration of independence under El'tsin in June 1990, a move which basically placed Russian law above the Soviet Union's.

In retrospect, the introduction of the Council of the Federation in 1988, having little more than consultative power and

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claims of fostering local cultures and languages, can be seen as an enormous miscalculation in the storm of centrifugal forces emerging in Central and Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union itself. Equally decisive, the absence of any economic advantage that could be offered to the republics now seeking secession proved to be as disastrous as the failure to abandon the ideology in a multi-ethnic state – despite a moderately successful referendum in favour of preserving the Union in March 1990[5] and local elections that gave further power and legitimacy to local politicians (Smith, 2005:54-5).

*Perestroika's* failure to democratise the Soviet Union is rooted in Gorbachev's attempt to preserve a non-ideological liberalised yet authoritarian socialism[6] while at the same time introducing liberal market reforms, modestly democratised institutions, relatively free media and a more loose yet lacking federalist system. Such inherent flaws could only lead to a zigzagging in which a planned economy with marketised features, one-party rule with democratised elections, an open society[7] *only* in the service of renewing socialism and a multi-ethnic state without a common ideology leading to a rudimentary form of federalism proved impossible to sustain. *Perestroika* was a liberalisation *within*, not a democratisation *of* the system, a contradictory third way of "non-market democratic socialism" (Sakwa, 1998:289). It could therefore never lead to a full democratisation and a free market (however defined). Instead, it remained a hybrid of communism and democracy. Such ambiguity unavoidably made Gorbachev step into the trap of being president and First Party Secretary at the same time, leading to deadlock and the decline of his own influence as he could not possibly serve both appointments equally. The CPSU itself, now without its natural power monopoly created to guide the process to a class-free world, proved impossible to reform as its whole existence was based on the communist *weltanschauung*.

Moreover, economic and political reforms could not be unveiled as resisting neo-Stalinist forces throughout the *apparatchik* hindered potentially successful outcomes from the very start (Sakwa, 1998:282). The August Coup of 1991 revealed the fierce conservative resistance Gorbachev faced throughout his reforms. The liberal movement under El'tsin, in contrast, used the reforms to push forward the Soviet Union's dissolution by questioning the system as a whole. Thus, both political sides radicalised and pursued their own aims instead of, as predicted by Gorbachev, developing a neo-Leninist political culture. "Once the genie of political pluralism had been out of the bottle," Richard Sakwa points out, "it would take a life on its own" (Sakwa, 2010:5). After almost seven decades of propagandistic suppression, an unprecedented economic downturn from the 1970s onwards (aggravated by *perestroika*), the forceful cohesion of a multi-national and multi-ethnic state as well as disillusion with communism, Gorbachev's liberalised socialism offered too little to maintain a socialist society under the dictatorship of the proletariat.

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[1] For Samuel P. Huntington, liberalisation is the "partial opening of the non-democratic regime short of choosing governmental leaders through freely competitive elections". Those regimes might "open up some issues for public debate, loosen censorship, sponsor elections of offices that have little power, permit some renewal of civil society and take other steps in democratic direction." Yet, "liberalization may or may not lead to full-scale democratization." (Huntington, 1991:9)

[2] A debate on how to define democracy would go beyond the scope of this essay. However, Huntington defines democracy as "decision makers [that] are selected through fair, honest and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes" and where "the existence of civil and political freedoms to speak, publish, assemble, and organize" is guaranteed (Huntington, 1991:7).

[3] From 1988 onwards, shortages in basic consumer goods were the order of the day. Moreover, the Soviet GNP fell by two per cent in 1990, whereas the national income declined by four per cent. The first term in 1991 faced a further ten per cent drop in GNP (Smith, 2005:45 & Marples, 2004:34-5).

[4] In 1988, the CPSU had around 20 million members.

[5] The referendum was boycotted by several republics (the Baltics, Armenia, Georgia and Moldova). Moreover, it remains open to discussion in which way the actual question triggered a biased tendency towards affirming the proposition.

[6] Arguments proposing that Gorbachev's aim was to bring about the collapse of the Soviet Union can be supported by early his adherence to remain the first secretary of the CPSU (he simply could have resigned to pursue a more democratic multiple party system) and second by the use of force that was exercised during the Lithuanian independence movement in 1991. Gorbachev in fact mentioned more than once his intention to only pursue a modernisation of the Soviet system (Robinson, 1992:427).

[7] Brown highlights that the prerequisite of a civil society "is the existence of autonomous associations and organisations neither created *nor dominated by the state*" (emphasis added, Brown, 2007:157).

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*Written for: Post-Soviet Politics*  
*Date written: March 2010*