

Was Communism Truly Politically Stagnant in the 1970s?

Written by Vera Michlin

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VERA MICHLIN, SEP 14 2008

Brezhnev labelled his era as 'developed socialism', while Western scholars are divided about how to characterise this period. Some have suggested 'institutional pluralism', pointing out that 'elites have limited power and limited priorities over policy priorities'[1], others labelled it as 'institutional corporatism', which promotes the idea that interest groups were incorporated into the policy making process.[2] This work will show that whereas the perceptions of the power balance differ, communism in the 1970s was stagnant both as an ideology and as a form of government. First, this work will outline several factors which made the system stagnant. In this context, it is also important to bear in mind that there was some progress in several aspects of Soviet policy but the analysis will show that the inability to turn them into real progress was ingrained in the system. This work will argue that the method and the idea that led to the removal of Khrushchev created a system, unable to evolve or reform. Moreover, this work will demonstrate that the Soviet society was radically changing during this period and that for many actors in Soviet life stagnation was very convenient. Nevertheless, these changes only emphasise to what extent the Soviet system became ideologically bankrupt.

There is a natural difficulty in defining communism. This difficulty originates from the dichotomy of the term, since communism in the context of the Soviet Union means both the ideology and the system of governance in the Soviet Union. It is important to deal with both definitions of the term since they are interlinked in the way that the ideology justified the regime and vice versa. In the same way political stagnation will eventually lead to the weakening of the ideology and ideological bankruptcy will result in political stagnation. There are many phenomena that are widely accepted as clear indicators of political stagnation and bad governance, which became widespread under Brezhnev's rule. Examples are corruption, lack of political turnover, aging politicians, and crackdown on intellectual freedoms.

Corruption is very much associated with Brezhnev's regime. It is commonly believed that in the 1970s Russia and the Soviet Republics were more corrupt than in any other time (maybe with the exception of the current administration). However, corruption as a social phenomenon is very hard to measure mainly since it is done in secret and difficult to record. Thus, corruption is usually measured according to people's perception and data is never accurate. One form of corruption is the process of election of cadres through party instruments, also known as *nomenklatura*. This practice continued during Brezhnev's rule and obviously generated the creation of networks of protection, nepotism and front corruption. It has been estimated that these networks were so widespread that in the Soviet Union 85 per cent of leadership cooptation was not due to the person's skills but because of patron-client relations.[3] It was probably not the corruption itself, which can be seen as endemic rather than period-related phenomenon in the Soviet Union, but the bluntness with which it was done and the lack of any punitive mechanisms that made Brezhnev's era so much

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associated with it. Brezhnev himself was quoted saying that 'nobody, lives just on his wages'.^[4]

The lack of turnover in political positions is also a clear sign of stagnation. Brezhnev's predecessors had their methods of renewing the cadres; Stalin through purges and Khrushchev through the legislated compulsory renewal of fixed quotas from different bodies. However, Brezhnev was not a dictator like Stalin, he did not have power over life and death of his subordinates or the cult to justify such powers.^[5] He was also not like erratic shifter like Khrushchev. In fact, one of the first things Brezhnev did when coming to power was to stop the compulsory renewal of party candidates.^[6] Brezhnev's period is often labelled by historians as a time of 'stability of the cadres' or 'bureaucratic tranquillity'.^[7] Brezhnev set the trend from the earliest operations, when all the members of the Politburo elected in 1966 were re-elected in 1971.^[8] This does not necessarily mean that no dismissals ever took place, but as a general trend the regime did not have any mechanism or even singled attempts of renewing its cadres and negative behaviour was generally tolerated.

Lack of mechanisms for dismissal led to the extremely aging leaders. In 1977 six members of the Politburo were over seventy and at most of the time the average age of the members of the Politburo was over sixty-five.^[9] Generally, very old politicians tend to be less dynamic in their decisions and less likely to favour reform. In addition, the age of the members of the Politburo and the fact that there was no orderly way to send people into retirement meant that many of them had health problems, which prevented them from functioning as expected of politicians. Mikhail Gorbachev writes in his memoirs that according to Brezhnev's doctor, his 'illness was developing since the early 1970s and the main cause was arteriosclerosis and overdoses of tranquillisers, which caused depression and sluggishness'.^[10] Furthermore he went through several serious strokes, the first in 1974 and second in 1976, which was even more detrimental to his functionality. This was noticeable in his public appearances and his health problems were widely known.

The crackdown on intellectual freedoms can also show that the country was in a state of stagnation. This was a clear sign of the undoing of Khrushchev's reforms. Although Khrushchev also was reorienting from liberal acceptance of art, Brezhnev went much further.^[11] Unlike Stalin's regime, which wanted to eliminate all individual thought and saw every intellectual expression as potentially harmful, Brezhnev's regime made a distinction between wanted – economically profitable, and unwanted – politically harmful intellectual activity.^[12] This resulted in strict control by the Glavlit and the Writers' Union and generally more 'consistent and purposeful control'.^[13] It coincided and was to some extent linked with the partial (or the non-formal) rehabilitation of Stalin, which meant that writers could no longer express their criticism or write about their memories of those times.^[14]

Although Brezhnev's period had many features which indicated the stagnation of the system it is important to note those events which did generate some change and progress. Most prominently Brezhnev's era was a period of further warming in the relations with the US. Brezhnev picked up his predecessor's rapprochement of the US of 'peaceful coexistence' and took it further coining the term 'détente'.^[15] He visited the US and invited the US Presidents Nixon and Ford to Moscow. In 1969 the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty was signed as well as the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT). In 1975 the Helsinki Final Act was signed; it included respect for sovereignty; renunciation of the use of force for settling disputes; peaceful settlement of disputes; non-intervention in internal affairs; respect for human rights; territorial integrity of states; and the inviolability of frontiers. Article 9 also included the agreement to intensify cooperation among states, which included academic and intellectual exchange.^[16] In 1970-1972, under American pressure about 100,000 Soviet Jews were allowed to emigrate. These steps can be seen as genuine opening to the West by the regime and can indicate progress in relation with other

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countries and the rehabilitation of the Soviet image. However, these policies proved to be skin deep and did not develop into a real reform of the system on the lines of the agreements. The Jewish emigration was brought to an end before all those who wanted were allowed out and many who have been refused visa were degraded to a level of non-persons, losing all they had and in many cases having to move from their place of residence to other republics. Détente collapsed in 1979 with the Soviet involvement in Afghanistan. Moreover, without internal reform and reorientation this warming in the relations with the West only suggested that ideologically communism was weakened by the competition with capitalism.

The system was put to halt not out of nowhere. Brezhnev's regime came about in such a way that reform was virtually impossible. Khrushchev was removed from post by a coup of the presidium, which broadly accused him of erratic policies, rudeness, disregard to his colleagues, creation of cult of personality and general failure. Khrushchev reacted by apologising for whatever he did wrong and remarking that 'I'm also glad that the party has gotten to the point when it can rein in even its first secretary'.^[17] The party removed Khrushchev because he was undermining their bond of protection, but unlike Stalin he was not silencing them with fear and violence. This was a clear victory of the party (e.g. oligarchy) over the first secretary (e.g. autocracy). Brezhnev emerged out of a consensus and his power lay in his ability to maintain consensus. As a result there were very few sackings in the central party leadership and the collective power of the Politburo increased while the power of the general secretary weakened.^[18] It is true that some form of cult of personality of Brezhnev did emerge; however, it seems that the reasons for that were quite different from the cults of his predecessors. The Politburo was contented with Brezhnev and did not want him to be removed. They encouraged his cult of personality even when he was obviously dysfunctional. As Gorbachev notes: 'an ailing General Secretary suited the kraikom and obkom first secretaries, as well as the Prime Minister and the ministers, since it gave them free rein in their 'dioceses'.^[19] Thus the system was not simply politically stagnant – it was paralysed from its backbone.

In retrospect Russians and former Soviet citizen will label this period as 'stagnation' (*zastoy*); however, they will embark on it with nostalgia rather than sadness or dissatisfaction. This could be just because people tend to omit the negative things in their memories, but it could also mean that there was something in this period which was very convenient to the Soviet citizen – that actually for them things did not seem as bad as one might think. While the political regime was ostensibly stagnating, society was rapidly changing and acquiring new ideas and new forms of expression.

As Archie Brown noted in 1978, 'Given the national and social tensions which the current system keeps under control, it is not unlikely that the radical loosening of that structure would lead to anarchic situation in the state'.^[20] Brown very accurately described the dangers that a reform and even more a failed reform was posing for the Soviet people. Reform was dangerous but change in the society unavoidable. Moshe Lewin argues that Gorbachev and his reforms did not appear out of nowhere – during Brezhnev's time there were important undercurrents shaping new thinking. He quotes the British journalist Martin Walker: "The country went through a social revolution while Brezhnev slept."^[21] The 1970s saw the continuation of rapid urbanisation, increase in the quality of life, increased level of secondary and higher education and most importantly change of generation.^[22] The fact that there was no change of generation at the very top did not stop the natural change of generation of society. The new generation brought new attitudes and change in aspiration and lifestyle.^[23] With education and political stability people developed greater individualism and were more free to engage in exchange of opinions with friends or colleagues. ^[24] This meant that if one was not an out-front dissident, one could create for himself micro-cosmos of inter-personal communication and non-ideological life. A survey suggests that about 90 per cent of the Soviet people at the time

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tended to discuss the news with friends and 40 per cent indicated that they modified their views after discussion.[25] However, since one could not express his criticism of the system in public or in a constructive way, this trend is only an indicator that doublethink and lip service became more widespread and true believers in the system became fewer. The Soviet society was both a reaction and an outcome of the deep political stagnation of the 1970s.

To conclude, the 1970s were years of obvious political stagnation. Indicators of political stagnation are easy to find. Progresses which were achieved, such as achievements in foreign policy, only further undermined the ideological stand of the USSR. The Soviet system came into terms with the West. The Soviet people who were by then concentrated in cities were adopting an even more bourgeois lifestyle, especially the younger generation. Brezhnev, when still functioning, ruled through the politics of consensus. This made the system even more paralysed and unable to generate reform. Furthermore, in 1972 huge reserves of oil were discovered in Tumen in Siberia. This oil was particularly cheap to extract and the Soviet Union started behaving like a 'petroleum state' (i.e. reforms are not necessary since the money pours from underground sources), a trend that continues until this day. The system was in deep need of reform if it wanted to survive, but as history proved, it was unable to perform the needed change of course without disintegrating. One might suggest that the stagnation of the 1970s was the beginning of the end.

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