

Can Gorbachev Change the Soviet Union?

The International Dimensions
of Political Reform

Zdenek Mlynar



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**Translated by Marian Sling
and Ruth Tosek**

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Preface

This book was conceived and written at the time of the Nineteenth All-Union Conference of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1988. The manuscript was finalized in the spring of 1989. The English edition comes out a full year later—a year that was marked by stormy developments in the Soviet Union and in the entire Soviet bloc and brought some far-reaching and important systemic changes. It is therefore impossible to update the text through additions and corrections.

The original main purpose of the study was to analyze the specifically Soviet historical and ideological conditions for a change of the system that could take place without dangerous disruptions. I intended to describe an optimal and realistic program for systemic change and at the same time to point out the limitations of any change that is mainly imposed from above.

At the time it was still correct to argue that Gorbachev's principal problem consisted in mobilizing sufficient popular pressure against the bureaucratic system. But during the year 1989 this pressure "from below" manifested itself in extreme forms of mass unrest, such as strikes, mass demonstrations, and in some cases nationalistic conflicts marked by violence and pogroms. In the smaller East European countries we witnessed an extraordinarily rapid disintegration of the Soviet-type system. It is therefore no longer possible today to speak about the existence of a "bloc" as I do it in Chapter 3 in the section on the impact of reform on the Soviet bloc.

Some tendencies and conflicts that had already been noticeable earlier and that are described in this study have,

at the beginning of 1990, not only acquired great momentum but also become so interrelated that they form a veritable Gordian knot. The fate of Gorbachev's reform politics will depend on whether it will be possible to unravel this knot, gradually, without disruptions, and through compromise. In the area of politics, the nationalist problem has become much more serious and important than I have described it. In my study I did not make it a separate object of analysis but dealt with it only in the context of the representation of interests.

In spite of all these limitations, I believe that the study might help the reader to understand the developments in the Soviet Union. Some parts of the study might be overtaken by events, but the book as a whole represents a valid in-depth analysis of the Soviet system and a description of possible scenarios for future developments that are only applicable to the Soviet Union and cannot be measured by Western standards. This applies to the history predating Gorbachev's reform efforts as well as to the specific developments of institutional structures, such as the rule of law in the Soviet system. I also believe that the analysis of the role of the Communist party remains valid, in spite of tendencies toward the formation of other parties.

If it should turn out that the pace of change will increase further, bringing more democracy earlier to the Soviet Union than I anticipated in my cautious analysis, I will still be happier than in the opposite case.

Zdenek Mlynar

Introduction

In 1985 Gorbachev assumed the highest political post in the Soviet Union. Since then, a host of books has been written on the subject, together with a vast number of articles, studies, and commentaries on what his new policy means and what it does not mean, on what it can or cannot change in the USSR as well as in the rest of the world. There is no need today to put forward specific arguments supporting the contention that Gorbachev's policy is a genuine endeavor for change. Only an insignificant minority of analysts would claim that this policy is nothing but a tactical maneuver to conceal an unchanging reality. Gorbachev is serious about his policy of *perestroika* (restructuring)—on this there is increasing agreement even in the West. Yet the question as to what its content will be remains open.

There can be no doubt that Gorbachev and his group within the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) really intend to change existing conditions both in domestic policy and in the sphere of international relations. But there is no straightforward reply to questions regarding the direction and extent of this change—nor to the question of whether Gorbachev will be able to achieve all he hopes to achieve. He is limited by an entire spectrum of conditions, only some of which are obvious; others remain more or less concealed, and their significance is not always quite clear.

In this study I want to focus attention precisely on this spectrum of conditions. My intention is to outline the possibilities for qualitative changes in the Soviet system and the limits to reforms, at least for the foreseeable future.

I also want to focus attention on problems that cannot be judged according to ideas current in the West, because in the USSR the same concepts may have, and in fact often do have, a different meaning. I believe that it is important, when discussing these ideas, to point to at least the main historical factors that can determine the prospects for radical reforms in the existing economic, social, and political system. In my opinion, these are not confined to factors originating mainly in the years of Stalin's totalitarian dictatorship; a number are also linked with the history of Russia, whose cultural and political traditions differ from those that have shaped developments in the West.

Unless these and similar matters are taken into account, it is not possible to answer the question of whether Gorbachev has even a chance of changing the Soviet system successfully or whether he will meet the same fate as Khrushchev or the reform communists of Poland, Hungary, or Czechoslovakia. Moreover, it is in these fundamental aspects of Soviet reality that we can see how far Soviet society and its political leadership has proven successful or not in coming to terms with the past—with the assessment of their own history. Only in this context is it possible to attempt an analysis of the relationships among the economy, politics, and ideology in the course of the reforms now under way.

Up to now, Western analysts have paid little attention to a separate issue—namely, the need and possibility for changes in the institutional political system of the USSR. In the crudest terms, this issue is generally discussed in the West as the problem of the one-party monopoly; and an answer is usually sought by speculating as to whether it is possible to anticipate the emergence of a system of more than one political party—a party in power and an opposition according to the pattern of West European parliamentary traditions.

I believe that to put the question this way is to vastly oversimplify the matter. More to the point, the question is whether and under what conditions the different interests, needs, and aspirations of the various social groups that make up the "reality" of Soviet society can be formulated and expressed within the institutional structure of the political system in the USSR.

In my view this problem cannot be solved simply by referring to the existence of different political parties. But it is a problem whose solution is of fundamental importance for the future of the Soviet system: If the qualitative changes programmed by Gorbachev are to become truly irreversible, and if they are to be independent of the personalities of the party and state leadership, they must be anchored institutionally. If such anchoring does not occur, the changes in the political system will necessarily remain provisional.

The third set of questions to be discussed in this study relates to Soviet foreign policy, or, more precisely, the Soviet concept of relations between the Soviet system and the "rest of the world," with the possibility of cooperation (or conflict) between the Soviet system and other economic and political systems in today's world. Can the nature of this complex of relations, known in simplified terms as East-West relations, be changed? Can relations between East and West essentially be demilitarized? Can demilitarization be achieved by the USSR, a world superpower precisely (or even exclusively) *because* of its military power and not because of its economic efficiency or political attractiveness? Can the present character of relations within the Soviet bloc, which have more than once proved to be based largely on Soviet military strength (as in 1956 and 1968), be changed without endangering the superpower position of the USSR?

The answers to these and similar questions surely do not depend solely on the intentions of Gorbachev and his

political leadership. Nor do they depend unilaterally on political steps taken by the Soviet side. And yet the Soviets' behavior is a decisive factor for possible change in this international context, because it is the Soviet side that is declaring its intention to change existing practices and advance along a new path. It is for this reason that we shall discuss these issues—and the opportunities offered by new developments—from the Soviet perspective.

These issues are treated here in terms of politics and possible political changes. Questions concerning economic matters are dealt with only in this political context. Although transformations in the economic sphere are certainly important to the fate of the reforms as a whole, it is beyond the author's power to make an analysis of the questions pertaining to the Soviet economy, the mechanism of economic management, the relationship between the plan and the market, and the problems that are linked with the Soviet's attempts to find solutions to its present economic crisis. The reader must seek answers to these and similar questions in the very extensive literature now available.¹

The object of this study is not to foretell the future. Nor is it possible to provide unequivocal answers to all of the questions posed in this volume. At times, merely the formulation of a question may well be useful; at other times, it may be important to highlight more than one possible answer to a given question, even when it is impossible to say with certainty which alternative will be realized.

In some cases I have tried to overcome the bad habit, widespread in the West, of applying our own standard of judgment on reforms that, by necessity, emanate from a totally different political system. Gorbachev's reforms, their objectives and possibilities, successes and failures, cannot be measured by a Western yardstick; they can be judged only within the context of the Soviet past and present. It

is by this means only that we can consider the future without losing touch with existing reality.

Even as the reforms are carried out, development in the USSR will continue to follow a specific course in accordance with Soviet (Russian) conditions and possibilities. But the features most open to development will be those that correspond, on the whole, to the common interests and needs of various societies in the world today—those that ameliorate conflict situations and promote cooperative relations between the Soviet system and other systems.

In order to achieve the objective of cooperative relations, both sides must refrain from harboring illusions. Such realism, I believe, is compatible with an optimistic view of the future.



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1 / What Can a Radical Reform Mean in the USSR?

The chapter title poses the question I address throughout this book, not only in the first chapter. But subsequent chapters deal with specific problems: which changes are realistically possible in an institutional political system, and which are possible in the sphere of international relations. This chapter deals more with a general view as to what is (or is not) possible in the USSR should Gorbachev's policy be totally successful.

Even in this case, of course, we cannot expect more than political changes can offer—to say nothing of changes carried out in a relatively short period of time. So, in posing the question of radical reform, I have in mind a period of roughly ten years—in other words, a foreseeable period (at least in terms of its characteristic features).

Gorbachev and Previous Attempts at Reform

The Soviet system must be reformed if developments are not to lead to insoluble contradictions and crises—so the Soviet leadership acknowledged some thirty years ago, after Stalin's death. And, in fact, several attempts at reforming the Soviet system have been made—both in the USSR itself under Nikita Khrushchev and in other Soviet-bloc countries (in Poland and Hungary in 1956, in Czechoslovakia in 1968, and in Poland in 1980–1981). Other countries outside the Soviet bloc—countries whose original political orientation basically coincided with the “Soviet model” of

economic, social, and political development—have at various times tried to introduce substantial changes and deviations from this model. Such efforts were made, in particular, by Yugoslavia after 1948 and by China after 1958.

The past thirty years have yielded a wealth of experience with attempts at reform; it is therefore understandable that Gorbachev's current policies are often compared to this past experience. Such a comparison tends to arouse pessimism, however, because—with the exception of China, where reforms are only now being introduced and have not yet been completed—all other attempts have failed (albeit for a variety of reasons and in entirely different forms). It is easy to arrive at the conclusion that Gorbachev, like his predecessors, must also fail.

Although the history of the Soviet system undoubtedly offers more than enough cause for pessimistic forecasts, Gorbachev's present attempt at reform cannot be identified with earlier attempts. Set off against the many similarities is a whole series of differences—some of which strongly suggest that the bad experiences of the past need not necessarily be repeated.

A direct analogy to the smaller Soviet-bloc countries—Poland, Hungary, or Czechoslovakia—is out of the question. Attempts at reform in those countries failed mainly because they were prevented from setting out on their independent paths, and because the decisive blows to their reform efforts were delivered by outside forces. I am not referring merely to the outright Soviet military intervention in Hungary in 1956 or in Czechoslovakia in 1968 but more broadly to the decisive dependence of these countries on the USSR and to the overall situation in the entire Soviet bloc that, in the final analysis, put insurmountable obstacles in the way of these reforms. The two open military interventions highlighted this restriction. But even where such intervention did not take place, attempts at reform were essentially

restricted by the situation in the USSR and throughout the bloc—not only in Poland in 1957–1958 and again in 1980–1981, but also in Hungary after 1968 and in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) throughout its history.

One of the major reasons for the conflict between the isolated attempts at reform in the smaller Soviet-bloc countries, on the one hand, and the interests of the USSR and the entire bloc, on the other, was the fact that in those smaller countries attempts at reforming the Soviet-type system were always (though to differing degrees) linked with endeavors to attain greater independence from Moscow. All European Soviet-bloc countries reached a point in their histories that marked the end of any chance that they would carry out, independently and with full sovereignty, their own particular policy of “building socialism.” Roughly speaking, this point occurred somewhere in the first postwar years (1947–1948 at the earliest). It coincided with sweeping political changes that marked the beginning of the usually enforced process of Sovietization—that is, the imposition of a Soviet-type economic, social, and political system without regard for the stage of development, the historic traditions, or the will of the majority of the population in the country involved.

What has since been called the process of “building socialism” has, of course, taken place in each of the European Soviet-bloc countries under different conditions.² Certain differences are of an entirely fundamental nature, especially those pertaining to developments in the immediate postwar period. In some of these countries it would have been inconceivable for the Communist party to have gained the leading position of power (let alone a monopoly of power) without the decisive role of the Soviet army. This clearly applies to the countries defeated in the war, such as the GDR, Hungary, and Romania. But it also applies to Poland. However, in countries such as Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia,

and, perhaps to some extent, Bulgaria, the situation was entirely different; the communists enjoyed considerable influence, and the possibility of "building socialism" did not depend to any significant extent on the presence of the Soviet army (a presence that ended after 1945 in both Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia).

Irrespective of these differences, it can be said that after Stalin's death, these countries' attempts at reforming the imposed Soviet system always entailed specific efforts to return to their own independent development prior to the forced Sovietization. In the USSR itself (and generally also in the neighboring countries of the bloc, where no reforms happened to be under way), these efforts have hitherto been described as attempts at "counter-revolution," a "return to capitalism," and so forth—and, hence, have always provided the justification for all measures aimed at suppressing any moves toward reform.

The label "return to capitalism" was also applied to steps taken to restore ways of life that had existed before the forcible Sovietization of a given country. Granted, some of these steps have been linked in the past with capitalist economic and social conditions. But this is not to say that their observance would inevitably lead to the restoration of these conditions; for after years of Soviet-type development, the economic or class foundations for a reintroduction of capitalism no longer existed.

Attempts at reform in the smaller Soviet-bloc countries have generally focused on two sets of problems: a greater role for the market in the economy (or the possibility of a multisector economy, but with state and cooperative ownership clearly dominant), and elements of political pluralism (linked both with the right of various social groups to organize politically and with the mechanism of parliamentary democracy). Each country, however, has dealt with these problems in its own way and within the context

of its own tradition. Czechoslovakia, for example, fell back on practical experience with a functioning pluralist democracy in 1918–1938, whereas Hungary had more experience with an authoritarian regime. As the traditions of such countries clashed with the Soviet model, individual means had to be found to effect reforms utilizing these traditions—but without tinkering unduly with the Soviet model. Moscow perceived such efforts as “counter-revolution,” however, because the concept of “revolution” was identified exclusively with Sovietization.

Problems of this type do not threaten Gorbachev’s policy. His policy is an attempt at reform in the “mother country” of the Soviet system—a country accustomed not only to dealing with all its problems in its own way but also to dictating its will in these matters to other countries in the bloc, a country that sees itself as the model of “socialism” and “revolution” (or “socialist revolution”). The reforms in Czechoslovakia in 1968 were labeled “right wing opportunism.” Identical reforms in the USSR today are viewed as “creative Leninism.” Only the terminology has changed.

This advantage is, however, balanced by a disadvantage, in the sense that Gorbachev’s reform policy cannot refer to a point in the past that would form an organic and logical link with present political developments. For the present generation of Soviet citizens, there exists no memory of any other system. But that system must be changed; if it is not, the results will be stagnation, crisis, or even collapse. Soviet society today has no idea how a market economy functions; nor can it imagine the workings of pluralist democracy (a system that, in fact, has never existed throughout the history of the major regions of the USSR). Yet not even Gorbachev’s reform can do without certain elements of both the market and the pluralist interests.

To be sure, Gorbachev is in no danger of ending up like Dubcek. Whereas Dubcek’s major problem was to keep