

# MIKHAIL GORBACHEV: A TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADER

ARCHIE BROWN  
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Setting a high bar for calling a political leader “transformational,” I define such a leader as “one who plays a decisive role in introducing *systemic change*, whether of the political or economic system of his or her country or (more rarely) of the international system.”<sup>1</sup> The term “transformational” has a positive connotation, suggesting that fundamental change has produced a better system than that it replaced. Transformational leadership may, therefore, be distinguished from revolutionary leadership, even though revolutions may also generate systemic change. Revolution, as the term is commonly understood, involves a regime’s violent overthrow. More often than not, it replaces an authoritarian regime with another form of authoritarianism.<sup>2</sup>

Mikhail Gorbachev, by temperament and conviction a reformer rather than a revolutionary, became in a period of less than seven years an outstanding example of a transformational political leader. He achieved this while diluting the absolute authority and ceding many of the powers that had belonged to the party General Secretaryship. To a far greater extent than any of his predecessors in that office, he relied on his political skills and powers of persuasion. When he faced stiff opposition to political reform in 1987-88, he radicalized his agenda rather than back down, though there were other occasions when his acute political antennae led him to take a step back before moving two steps forward. It was in mid-1988 that he began making the Soviet political system qualitatively different from what it had been hitherto. He pushed through the Nineteenth Conference of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Archie Brown. 2014. *The Myth of the Strong Leader: Political Leadership in the Modern Age*. New York: Basic Books, 148-193, 148.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 148-149. I added, “It is rare, of course, for *all* of the aspirations of transformational leaders to be fully realized. And the systemic change they introduce may only partially survive the rule of their successors. However, the gulf between the utopian rhetoric of revolutionaries and the subsequent authoritarian reality is generally much wider.”

---

Archie Brown is Emeritus Professor of Politics at the University of Oxford. His most recent book is *The Human Factor: Gorbachev, Reagan, and Thatcher, and the End of the Cold War* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) a resolution stipulating that contested elections be held in 1989 for a new legislature endowed with real powers. That put in place the cornerstone of a pluralist polity. By the spring of 1990, if not earlier, the political system had become different in kind.

In his article for this journal, Gorbachev writes that when he became General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), the leadership “knew that changes of great magnitude and depth were necessary” and that they were “unanimous” that “leaving things as they were was not an option” (p. 212). The entire Politburo could agree that it was time to get the country moving again and perhaps even accept the goal of giving “people ownership of their lives and the country” (p. 212) because that level of generality did not present them with hard choices. But from the outset in 1985, perestroika meant different things to different people in the leadership and what it connoted for Gorbachev and his closest allies became more expansive over time. When issues of fundamental institutional change were broached and serious democratization got underway, profound differences of outlook within the ruling circles and in the broader political elite were too clearly visible to be glossed over. As Gorbachev himself observes in these pages, the superficial unity fractured once he and those he terms his “like-minded supporters” within the leadership took concrete reformist steps. The January 1987 plenum of the Central Committee put political reform firmly on the agenda and, as a result, “the struggle between the reformers and the anti-reform wing of the CPSU began in earnest” (p. 215).

Even though the need for economic reform was initially more on Gorbachev’s mind than political reform, it was change in the political system that took precedence, both in its ideational and practical aspects. Only the General Secretary could break the taboo on embracing the concept of “pluralism,” and in 1987 Gorbachev did so.<sup>3</sup> The “socialist pluralism” and “pluralism of opinion” of which he spoke favorably in that year became by the end of the decade “political pluralism.” Even the initial “socialist” qualifier was not crucial, for Gorbachev and his closest advisers were constantly redefining and broadening what they meant by socialism. Conceptual innovation and changing practice went hand in hand, and, unsurprisingly, there was resistance from conservative Communists within the leadership. Thus, at a Politburo meeting on October 15, 1987, Heydar Aliyev criticized the presence of “pluralism” in the draft report Gorbachev was to present on the seventieth anniversary of the October revolution, denouncing it as an “ideological term” that had originated in the West.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Before Gorbachev broke the taboo, on the rare occasions that “pluralism” was used in Soviet writing, it was employed pejoratively in critiques of “bourgeois democracy” (or of “revisionism,” such as that attributed to “Prague Spring” Communist reformers).

<sup>4</sup> “Zasedanie Politbiuro TsK KPSS 15 oktiabria 1987 goda” [Meeting of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CPSU on October 15, 1987]. Volkogonov Papers, National Security

Secretary of the Central Committee Anatoly Lukyanov said that in the West this meant a “pluralism of power,” but “we—Communists, the party—will not divide power with anyone.”<sup>5</sup> Gorbachev removed Aliyev from the Politburo in the same year. Lukyanov remained in leadership positions and cooperated with the putschists who attempted to seize power in August 1991, putting Gorbachev under house arrest.

The two main pillars of the Soviet Communist system were, first, the Communist Party’s monopoly on power (for which the official euphemism was “the leading role of the party”) and, second, strict hierarchy and discipline within that party as well as in society as a whole (with “democratic centralism” the euphemism for this highly centralized and far from democratic political order). In spite of the insistence of Lukyanov and of many conservative Communists that there must be no tampering with the party’s monopoly on power, Gorbachev refused to deploy the prerogatives of his office to prevent the emergence of independent political organizations. But there were many attempts to undermine him and his policies even well before 1990-91, by which time he was being fiercely assailed from multiple directions. Thus, in March 1988, Yegor Ligachev (who died, aged 100, as recently as May 7, 2021), though an ally of Gorbachev at the outset of his leadership, used the resources of the Central Committee Secretariat to promote the notorious neo-Stalinist article in *Sovetskaia Rossiia* by Nina Andreeva,<sup>6</sup> which, as Gorbachev writes, amounted to “an anti-perestroika manifesto” (p. 226). Rather than accommodate himself to reactionary critics, Gorbachev, with the help of such fellow reformers as Aleksandr Yakovlev and Georgii Shakhnazarov, radicalized the political agenda during the preparation of documents and resolutions for the Nineteenth Party Conference, held from June 28 to July 1, 1988.

The pluralization of Soviet politics was already well underway in 1989 before the Communist Party’s monopoly on power was removed from the Constitution of the USSR early the following year. At a plenary session of the Central Committee in February 1990, Gorbachev won support for taking the party’s guaranteed “leading role” out of the Constitution, a change in the country’s basic law that was duly made by the new legislature in March.<sup>7</sup> The Politburo remained the highest poli-

Archive, Washington, DC, p. 155.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Nina Andreeva. “Ne mogu postupať sia printsipami” [I Cannot Forsake Principles]. *Sovetskaia Rossiia*, March 13, 1988, 3. Its essence and aims were carefully dissected in a paper for Politburo discussion written by Aleksandr Yakovlev that formed the basis of an authoritative article, published anonymously, in *Pravda* on April 5, rebutting this attempt to turn the clock back. The full text of the document—presented, at Gorbachev’s instigation, to the Politburo—is published in Aleksandr Yakovlev. 2008. *Perestroika: 1985-1991. Dokumenty: neizdannoe, maloizvestnoe, zabytoe* [Perestroika: 1985-1991. Documents: Unpublished, Little-Known, Forgotten]. Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi fond “Demokratiia,” 192-200.

<sup>7</sup> At the February 1990 plenum, Gorbachev also went beyond the “socialist pluralism” he had

cy-making collective organ within the party but was no longer the highest policy-making body in the country. Power at the center had essentially been transferred from party to state institutions. “Democratic centralism” was abandoned by Gorbachev even earlier; it was discarded in the run-up to the first elections for the Congress of People’s Deputies of the USSR in March 1989. Once open debate was allowed within the Communist Party, with members competing against one another on different policy platforms for seats in the legislature, the party’s role in Soviet society could never again be what it had been in the past. In the new legislature, fundamental differences between members of the CPSU immediately became apparent.

Gorbachev embraced a whole range of freedoms that were anathema to the old guard. He used the authority of the office of General Secretary—which was immense until his own systemic change of the political system substantially reduced it by 1990-91—to approve the rapid development of glasnost into freedom of speech, with freedom of publication following closely behind. He supported freedom of religion and freedom of communication across frontiers. Crucially, he embraced free intellectual inquiry and political debate. Gorbachev had begun with a somewhat idealized view of Lenin, especially the Lenin of later years who launched the New Economic Policy (NEP). Yet Marxism-Leninism was dethroned as the ruling ideology and replaced by the open-ended and increasingly social democratic New Thinking, to which Gorbachev himself subscribed.<sup>8</sup> In the new conditions of “pluralism of opinion,” it had to compete with a wide range of political doctrines, including (most dangerously for the preservation of state unity) nationalisms of various hues.

Speaking with his favorite foreign head of government, Spanish Socialist Prime Minister Felipe González,<sup>9</sup> in October 1990, Gorbachev said that “socialism” for him meant “movement towards freedom, the development of democracy, the creation of conditions for a better life for the people” and for “raising the humane individual.” In that sense, he added, “I was and remain a socialist.”<sup>10</sup> Gorbachev had evolved in the embraced since 1987 and spoke positively of “political pluralism,” accepting in principle that other parties could compete for office within the new political system. See Archie Brown. 2007. *Seven Years that Changed the World: Perestroika in Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 306-309, esp. 307-308.

<sup>8</sup> Archie Brown. 2013. “Did Gorbachev as General Secretary Become a Social Democrat?” *Europe-Asia Studies* 65: 2: 198-220.

<sup>9</sup> When in late 1991 Andrei Grachev (Gorbachev’s last presidential press spokesman) asked him to which foreign politician he felt closest, Gorbachev did not have to think twice before naming González. He went on to say that he had not just a good working relationship but friendly relations “with Bush, Kohl, Mitterrand, Thatcher, and, in recent times, with Major. But with González especially” (Andrei Grachev. 1994. *Kremlevskaia khronika*. Moscow: Eksmo, 247).

<sup>10</sup> M.S. Gorbachev. 1993. “Doveritel’nyi razgovor: Beseda s presedatelem pravitel’sтва Ispanii F. Gonzalesom sostoialas’ v Madride 16 oktiabria 1990 g.” [Confidential Conversation: A Conversation with Prime Minister of Spain F. Gonzales Took Place in Madrid on October 16,

second half of the 1980s from Communist reformer to socialist of a social democratic type. He came to share the view of most European democratic socialists that it was wrong to regard the Soviet Communist system as “socialist.” “Slogans, yes!” he later wrote. “Elements of socialism, indeed, but not more.”<sup>11</sup>

Nothing could be further from the truth than the view sometimes encountered that if Gorbachev had not become Soviet leader in 1985, another Politburo member would have been obliged to embark on similar reforms. From their biographies, memoirs, interviews, actions, and public and private utterances, we know enough about the other surviving full members of the Politburo following Konstantin Chernenko’s death on March 10, 1985, to be sure that none of them would have opted for democratization. No other member of that Politburo would have aroused expectations of greater political independence in Eastern Europe in the way they were galvanized by Gorbachev’s domestic reforms and his transformation of Soviet foreign policy. It is inconceivable that they would have declared, as Gorbachev did, that the people of every country had the right to decide for themselves in what kind of political and economic system they wished to live. The “right to choose” emerged especially clearly in a speech he made to the United Nations on December 7, 1988. By the time Gorbachev sat down, little was left of past Soviet doctrine. His English-language interpreter at the UN that day, Pavel Palazhchenko (who is still with Gorbachev as interpreter and adviser), wrote in 2020, “Re-reading that speech today, it is difficult to find in it even traces of ‘Marxism-Leninism.’”<sup>12</sup>

After Gorbachev had reiterated in January 1989 to former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, former French President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, and former Japanese Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone every country’s “freedom to choose,” one of the close allies he had promoted to the Soviet Politburo, Vadim Medvedev, warned him that there would be “a crisis in Eastern Europe.” “Whatever it is,” Gorbachev responded, “they will have to decide for themselves how they will live.”<sup>13</sup> This they did in the course of 1989. Gorbachev’s words and actions had provided both a stimulus and the facilitating conditions for fundamental change in Central and Eastern Europe. The peoples of the region would have replaced their governments decades earlier but for their realistic assumption that to do so

---

1990]. In M.S. Gorbachev, *Gody trudnykh reshenii* [Years of Difficult Decisions]. Moscow: Al’fa-print, 239.

<sup>11</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev. 2006. *Poniat’ perestroiku ... Pochemu eto vazhno seichas* [Understanding Perestroika... Why It is Important Now]. Moscow: Al’pina, 25.

<sup>12</sup> Pavel Palazhchenko. 2020. “On khotel vnedrit’ v politiku moral’ [He Wanted to Introduce Morality into Politics]. *Mir peremen* 4: 119-124, 122.

<sup>13</sup> Pavel Palazhchenko. 1997. *My Years with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze: The Memoirs of a Soviet Interpreter*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 127.

would be to invite Soviet military intervention, as had been demonstrated in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968.

In his December 1988 UN speech, Gorbachev noted that a “one-sided emphasis on military strength” ultimately “weakens other components of national security.” He said that “freedom of choice” was “a universal principle” from which there must be no exceptions. But, he observed, when democratic values took the form of an “export order” they frequently and quickly became degraded.<sup>14</sup> The times demanded “a deideologization of interstate relationships,” with common humanity prevailing over the multiplicity of centrifugal forces in order to preserve “the viability of a civilization that is possibly the only one in the universe.”<sup>15</sup> By raising expectations in Eastern Europe and accepting the de-Communization of the region that resulted, Gorbachev was, accordingly, a transformational leader for those countries as well as for his own. He was subsequently blamed by Communist hard-liners and some Russian nationalists for “the loss” of East Europe. His reply was always along the lines of “To whom did we surrender them? To their own people.”<sup>16</sup>

The peoples of the Central and Eastern European countries—except in Romania, where the autocratic Nicolae Ceaușescu imposed a violent crackdown that ended with his own execution—were able, in the course of 1989, peacefully to exercise the freedom to choose their own political and economic system. That rejection of their Communist rulers and embrace of national independence marked the end of the Cold War, for its most salient manifestation was the division of Europe, which had been in place ever since Soviet-style regimes were imposed on these countries following the Second World War.

Few heads of government in the 1980s paid as much attention to the natural environment and to “green” issues as did Gorbachev. In his UN speech, Gorbachev emphasized “the worldwide ecological threats” that in many regions had become “simply frightening” and called for a center for ecological assistance to be set up under the auspices of the United Nations.<sup>17</sup> He spoke of the need to seek “an all-human consensus on movement towards a new world order,” but said progress must not come at “the expense of the rights and freedoms of the individual or of nations or at the

<sup>14</sup> M.S. Gorbachev. 1990. “Vystuplenie v Organizatsii Ob”edinennykh Natsii” [Speech at the United Nations]. In M.S. Gorbachev, *Izbrannye rechi i stat'i*, Vol. VII. Moscow: Politizdat, 188.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>16</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev. 1999. *On My Country and the World*. New York: Columbia University Press, 206. The peoples of Eastern Europe, he observed, had chosen their own path of development based on their national needs, and that was perfectly understandable, for the system “that existed in Eastern and Central Europe was condemned by history, as was the system in our own country” (*ibid.*).

<sup>17</sup> Gorbachev, “Vystuplenie v Organizatsii Ob”edinennykh Natsii,” 193.

expense of the natural world.”<sup>18</sup>

The Cold War, we may conclude, ended *ideologically* with that Gorbachev UN speech; it ended *concretely* when East Europeans, in the course of 1989, were able to exercise that freedom of political choice of which Gorbachev had spoken the previous year; and it ended *symbolically* with the December 1989 Malta summit meeting between the U.S. President and the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. At its conclusion, Gorbachev and U.S. President George H.W. Bush, speaking as partners rather than as adversaries, gave a joint press conference, the first time American and Soviet leaders had done so.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast with Deng Xiaoping, who counts as a transformational leader by virtue of marketizing the Chinese economy and raising the living standards of several hundred million Chinese, Gorbachev’s transformational credentials rest on his political, not economic, achievements. As he notes in his article in *Demokratizatsiya*, the Soviet leadership was slow to introduce marketizing reform, though many of Gorbachev’s critics underestimate the strength of the institutional interests opposed to movement to market prices. Indeed, Gorbachev himself, in the earlier years of his leadership, was in favor of introducing market elements to the economy rather than wholesale movement from a command to market economy. There was, however, a contradiction between trying to make the existing system work better and moving to an economic system based on different operational principles.

It was not until 1990 that Gorbachev concluded, partly as a result of the influence of Nikolai Petrakov (his economic aide throughout that year), that the command economy should be replaced by a market economy.<sup>20</sup> Even then, acceptance in principle was not accompanied by implementation in practice. There was fierce resistance to full-fledged marketization from within the party-state structures and the many institutional interests with a stake in the existing economic system. Moreover, the freeing of prices was a key component of marketization, and since many basic foodstuffs and services were heavily subsidized, that was going to make things worse for the majority of people before they got better. It is not surprising that Gorbachev sought a compromise economic solution in 1990, for the last two years of the Soviet Union’s existence were a time

---

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>19</sup> These points are elaborated in Archie Brown. 2020. *The Human Factor: Gorbachev, Reagan, and Thatcher, and the End of the Cold War*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, esp. 218-309.

<sup>20</sup> For Gorbachev, however, a market economy was not to be the kind of highly inegalitarian system favoured by President Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in Britain. He was much more impressed by the West German social market economy and by Scandinavian-style social-democratic economic models. *How* to move to anything resembling that was the problem.

when his earlier popularity and that of perestroika were in sharp decline. Shortages were vexatious, but sharp price hikes were liable to arouse even more discontent.<sup>21</sup> Gorbachev, with the benefit of hindsight, is probably right in reflecting in his article for this journal that 1987-88 would have been “politically and economically the right time” (p. 218) to undertake truly far-reaching economic reform rather than the technocratic restructuring sponsored by Chairman of the Council of Ministers Nikolai Ryzhkov.

However, from 1987 onwards, political change proceeded far faster than economic reform, and it accelerated from 1988. The change was faster than Gorbachev or anyone else expected in the mid-1980s. By 1990-91, events were spinning out of his control, but even then, how he reacted—in deciding whether or not to authorize repression to hold a fissiparous Soviet Union together or to frustrate aspirations for national unity in Germany—mattered greatly. But issues such as republics’ secession from the USSR or German reunification would not have reached the political agenda without the pluralization of the Soviet political system and the transformation of Soviet foreign policy that enabled the peoples of Eastern Europe to take their political destiny into their own hands and thus raised still further the expectations of the most disaffected of Soviet nationalities and of East Germans.

The breakup of the Soviet Union was an unintended consequence of perestroika but there was nothing inevitable about the ultimate failure to replace what had been, for the most part, a federation in name only with a genuine federalism comprising the majority of the Union Republics (though it is inconceivable that, to the extent the Union was democratic, it could have retained as members the three Baltic states). Gorbachev’s agency was undoubtedly a facilitating condition for the Union’s breakup, inasmuch as the new tolerance, political pluralism, and transformed foreign policy that had made possible the independence of the East European states gave encouragement and new opportunities to the most disaffected of Soviet nationalities. It was, however, Boris Yeltsin, putting short-term ambition ahead of longer-term Russian interests, who dealt the most decisive blow to the Union by declaring in 1990 that Russian law was superior to federal law and emboldening separatist movements in other republics. With the inadvertent aid of the blundering August 1991 putschists, he played a key

<sup>21</sup> A major part of the problem was that Nikolai Ryzhkov was Chairman of the Council of Ministers from 1985 until 1990 and his reformism remained essentially technocratic and within the parameters of the existing economic system. Yet it was Ryzhkov who was in overall day-to-day charge of the economy and the person to whom the heads of the numerous economic ministries (who overwhelmingly shared his views) were answerable. When Nikolai Petrakov told Ryzhkov that there was no need for a State Committee on Prices and that it should therefore be abolished, Ryzhkov replied, “You’re right, but in a few years’ time.” Petrakov’s response was to say, “Nikolai Ivanovich, you talk about the market as we used to talk about communism—it’s always sometime later!” (Nikolai Petrakov. 1991. Interviewed by Archie Brown, Moscow, June 18.)



role in ensuring that the new Union Treaty would not come into effect and that one state would become fifteen.

Unless a country is so small and lacking in resources as to be unviable as a separate state, size surely matters less than the quality of its government, whether corruption is rife or rare, and whether the people are able to hold their rulers to account in free and fair elections and in between them. Since Russia remains the world's largest country, and one rich in natural and human resources, the fact that it has 25 percent less territory than the Greater Russia that was the USSR surely matters less than the retreat, in many respects, from the political pluralism and democratic accountability that made such advances between 1988 and 1991. "More generally," as Gorbachev very fairly observes in this issue of the journal, "perestroika should be evaluated not in terms of what it failed to achieve or was not given time to achieve, but in terms of its magnitude in Russia's history and its positive consequences for the world" (p. 235).

