

PERESTROIKA AS A HUMANIST PROJECT

It is very rare for a major world leader to look back at a transformation he brought about 30 years later and be in a clear mind to analyze it critically and without self-aggrandizement. We are fortunate to have Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev himself reflect on perestroika — its achievements, its mistakes and its continuing relevance — in this essay written specially for *Demokratizatsia*. He states that he wants this essay to be his “contribution to dialogue between the past and the present.” In addition to analyzing the past, he offers some important insights for the future.

This essay is his most distilled and concise analysis of his creation — perestroika. Students of international affairs and politicians would be well advised to hear this reformer, who just turned 90, and revisit the magical years when the world went through a most dramatic, hopeful and peaceful transformation. His words of wisdom are addressed to those who share the ideals he still believes in: a world free of nuclear weapons, where disputes are resolved by negotiations and states exhibit restraint and consideration of each other’s interests, where international relations are based on norms and common human values. In domestic politics, his vision is grounded in pluralist democracy and non-violent political process. Economy, nationalism, foreign affairs are three main areas which he reexamines for missed opportunities and things he could have done differently.

The most authoritative scholarship published in the last thirty years on the Soviet reforms, by such authors as Archie Brown, William Taubman, Robert English, Jack Matlock and others,¹ as well as documentary evidence declassified in Russia and the United States, generally supports Gorbachev’s narrative as well as his criticisms of perestroika’s “mistakes and failings.” This narrative also rings true for someone who lived through the events discussed in the essay. I was a student at Moscow State University and then a graduate student at IMEMO at the height of perestroika, and these debates and events shaped who I was and determined my

career choices. 1989 was a year of miracles — I voted in the first free elections and I watched the Cold War ending in front of my eyes. Perestroika gave me freedom.

Gorbachev believes that perestroika and his vision are still relevant to his country and to the world today. He explains his perestroika as a “humanist project,” initiated in the name of people at the time when most people came to the conclusion that “we cannot go on living like this.” He points out that longing for change was widespread in the Soviet leadership and society. One may say that in 1985 everybody, regardless of their political views, saw realization of their hopes in the young and energetic general secretary, who was generally seen as a straight shooter and a protégé of Yury Andropov himself.

Many of Gorbachev’s critics in Russia accuse him of not having a clear plan of reform. He admits it, saying that it would have been strange to have a plan from the beginning, to envision the enormity of transformation given the profound crisis that he inherited and the previous decade of stagnation. He certainly did not intend to dismantle the Soviet Union; just the opposite — he intended to make it stronger and more competitive internationally. As a sincere believer in socialism, he intended to clean up the system, bring it to its original ideals, but not embark on a political reform.

If those were Gorbachev’s initial goals — did he fail as a leader? As the British scholar Archie Brown argues in his book *The Gorbachev Factor*, it would be wrong to judge Gorbachev’s success by how his actions and outcomes in 1989-90 corresponded to goals he announced in 1985 — his views and goals evolved significantly to include democratic multicandidate elections, market economy and a new voluntary confederation to replace the centralized one-party state.ⁱⁱ Gorbachev’s perestroika was a genuine revolution — albeit carried out by evolutionary means. And unlike most of the revolutions, it did not use violence as an instrument. Gorbachev addresses the issue of violence in Georgia (1989) and Lithuania (1991) and states firmly that he never authorized the use of force against demonstrators as his detractors claimed. However, in 1991, he was too slow to condemn the violence.

Gorbachev traces the roots of new thinking to the most progressive global thinkers and movements of the XX century — from Albert Einstein to the Palme Commission. And yet, he makes it abundantly clear that the Soviet reform was not a response to external pressure and Reagan’s military spending, but something that grew and ripened inside the Soviet society and was expressed by the best representatives of its elite. In a country suffocating under a calcified ideology, *glasnost* was the first step toward any reform. As a contrast to the “Chinese model,” Gorbachev believed that *glasnost* and openness would unleash people’s creative energy, which in turn would contribute to the economic reform. In his vision, the party was key to implementation of the reform with support from Soviet intelligentsia. This is indeed how it happened in the early stages of perestroika, but from 1987, when political reform became the focus, the party became the obstacle to further democratization.

Gorbachev has some critical things to say about intelligentsia for whom he had such high hopes. One can feel his bitter disappointment with the famed Soviet thinking elite, who, enchanted by *glasnost* and creative freedom, did not fully appreciate the responsibility that freedom brought, and used it mainly for criticism. Gorbachev talks about liberal intelligentsia demanding quick progress but “unable to fill shoes of nomenklatura in the sphere of management” of the country. Ironically, by 1990, by demanding more radical reforms, liberal intelligentsia often “linked up destructively with the hardline conservative opposition.” As a result, the process of disintegration “outpaced the process of building new institutions.” In Gorbachev’s view, evolutionary process would have helped avoid the painful dislocations of the 1990s.

So what could have been done differently in the economy? Gorbachev is very blunt in admitting his mistakes in this sphere. He now believes that they should have introduced price reform and massive imports of consumer goods as early as 1987. However, any price reform would have probably led to hoarding, plus, in 1987 there were no economists in the government who had experience with market mechanisms and no institutions to regulate transactions. The Law on

Cooperatives was an important step in the direction of market economy, but other innovations such as state quality control (*gospriemka*) or the Law on Work Collective did not work as well. Holding on to Nikolai Ryzhkov as Prime Minister until January 1991 was clearly a mistake, about which Gorbachev was warned by many people, including his closest adviser Anatoly Chernyaev and Evgeny Primakov.ⁱⁱⁱ

Among the greatest achievements of perestroika is the first multicandidate election of March 1989, which was arguably one of the most free elections in all Russian history, including today. Ironically, 85% of elected deputies were CPSU members, much higher than in previous Supreme Soviets, but the party itself already resembled a primordial fertile muck from which all forms of political associations were ready to spring to life. Alexander Yakovlev suggested to Gorbachev to split the party already in the end of 1985 in order to gradually move to a multiparty system. Gorbachev now regrets not stepping down as General Secretary in April 1991, but that might have been too late already.

In the sphere of international relations, it would be no exaggeration to say that Gorbachev's perestroika changed the world, and saved the world from the burden of arms race — at least temporarily. Gorbachev's biggest achievements were in foreign policy — ending the Cold War together with his American partners, letting Eastern Europe become truly independent, ending the war in Afghanistan, making German reunification possible, and signing unprecedented nuclear arms control treaties with the United States. And yet it is here that missed opportunities were the greatest and the regrets are bitter.

Starting with Reykjavik, where Gorbachev and Reagan almost agreed to eliminate nuclear weapons but the U.S. president was not willing to give up the Strategic Defense Initiative, Gorbachev was consistently proposing further and more radical arms control initiatives — including eliminating tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. He and Reagan signed the groundbreaking INF Treaty in 1987, but did not succeed in finalizing the 50% reductions in START. Bush came to Moscow in July 1991 to finally sign the START Treaty, but Gorbachev reflects, in

a veiled reference to the “pause” of 1989, that “the results that this visit produced could have been achieved even earlier.” Other ideas, such as jointly resolving regional conflicts, addressing the environmental crisis, and building a common European home and a new global system of comprehensive security, did not have time to materialize.

In this essay, Gorbachev is very gentle in his criticism of his partners. He celebrates joint efforts and does not blame them for missing opportunities, but he points to the opportunities where they existed. For him probably the most important lost opportunity that would have made a big difference for the fate of the New Union he was trying to create was the lack of support from the West at the G-7 summit in July 1991 for Soviet economic reform. He describes the careful preparations, willingness and readiness for the next stage of a more radical reform, and the critical need for credits and membership in Western financial institutions. Yet he came home from London empty-handed. He does not say the Soviets were entitled to financial aid, but in a beautiful turn of phrase he makes his disappointment clear: “at the most difficult, make-or-break moment of our reforms, we were entitled to hope that our partners will take a step in our direction”. Had the West come through with support in July 1991, the August coup would likely not have happened.

Gorbachev’s harshest criticism is reserved for his domestic opponents who tried to remove him from power in the conservative putsch, which undermined the momentum of the just negotiated New Union treaty. The putsch crumbled in three days, but the destruction of the Union continued by the populist leaders of Russia, Ukraine and Byelorussia, who were “guided above else by their intent to ‘remove Gorbachev’.” They colluded to bring themselves to power by getting rid of the center and putting an end to Gorbachev’s dream, supported by the popular referendum of April 1991, to build a voluntary and democratic Union.

Was Gorbachev a dreamer? Yes, he was, but he was also a practical politician, who used the power of his office and his considerable skills of persuasion to turn his dreams into reality. Many of his dreams were implemented

and made both his country and the world a safer and better place and made it possible for Europe to become united. The common European home, which he so desperately wanted, was built after the end of the Cold War made it possible, but, as Chernyaev put it, the new Russia did not get an apartment in that home. Gorbachev's biographer, William Taubman, calls him a "visionary" and a "tragic hero," whose ideas were probably ahead of the "raw material" with which he had to work

In his essay, Gorbachev has some harsh words for post-Cold War leaders who succumbed to hubris and triumphalism, which he calls "immoral." He points to U.S. claims of "winning the Cold War" as the root cause that "undermined the foundations of new international politics," and set the world on the wrong track. Gorbachev's advice and his hope are for international rules of behavior based on "universal moral principles" and for rejecting militarism. Studying perestroika and new thinking just might give new leaders an idea to declare that "nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought" as a first step toward a better world.

- i Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford University Press, 1996), William Taubman, *Gorbachev: His Life and Time* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2017), Robert English, *Russia and the Idea of the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), Jack Matlock, *Autopsy on an Empire: The American Ambassador's Account of the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: Random House, 1995)
- ii Brown, op. cit., pp. 306-307
- iii Anatoly S. Chernyaev Diary, August 25, 1990, Manuscript donated to the National Security Archive