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THE WRONG PATH OR PAVING THE WAY - GORBACHEV'S PERESTROIKA AS A PROCESS OF TRANSITION TOWARDS MARKET ECONOMY AND DEMOCRACY

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The coup of August 1991 undertaken by conservative elements in the Soviet leadership, (thwarted by committed groups of Moscow citizens under the leadership of Yeltsin), posed one of the most dramatic events in the history of the Soviet Union. It meant that, in this country, which had always been considered the "center of communist world-revolution" by supporters and opponents alike, Lenin and Stalin's socialism was finally dead and buried. Its state superstructure, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, has disintegrated. Now, at least in the political aspect, a market economy and democracy may be possible for the countries of the former Soviet Union.

Yet, the failed coup also brought an end to a period of development in the history of the Soviet Union which seems relatively short, in terms of its duration, but the historical significance of which is much greater: the 6-year period of perestroika inspired by Gorbachev. One of the central questions currently being raised asks how perestroika as a period in the history of the Soviet Union should be classified. Did it primarily, or even exclusively, represent an attempt by reform-orientated forces committed to communist ideology to rescue the socialist system for the sake of their own political power? Or is perestroika, to a certain extent, now considered an inevitable period in the development of the Soviet Union, even perhaps as having paved the way for democratic and market-economy structures?

Consequently, the subject under discussion is the problem of the multilayers, complexity and multidimensionality of this period in Soviet history, the analysis of which is important for an understanding of Soviet development, as well as for a solution to the practical problems arising from this development.

THE AIMS OF PERESTROIKA

If perestroika is measured by the social and political objectives set by its main advocate Gorbachev, then this concept has indeed failed. [1] Although he reckoned with difficulties, perhaps even with crises, it is obvious that Gorbachev did not want to

bring about the present situation. It was even less his intention to remove the socialist system, not to mention dissolving the structure of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which is probably the most painful defeat for him.

Gorbachev's program of perestroika, as announced in 1985, may be characterized by three aspects:

A fundamental break with the Stalinist past. In Gorbachev's view, Stalinist socialism with its exclusive emphasis on a political center beyond every form of control in the shape of the Politbureau of the Communist Party, possessed an authoritarian and dictatorial character. It was characterized by crime and the abuse of power and, especially in its final stage, by economic ineffectivity, as well. It led to extreme restrictions on the room for maneuver in foreign policy.

Gorbachev intended to establish a kind of socialism in the Soviet Union that would strengthen its international position and meet with the Soviet people's acceptance. Therefore, he aimed at economic prosperity, and regarded a fundamental renewal of the political structures as unavoidable in this process. Decisions should no longer be made only by the Politbureau and the attendant party bureaucracy. Moreover, while strengthening the state center, especially in the form of the presidential office, he also pleaded for a partial autonomy of lower levels of management, (firms, local authorities and the republics), as well as for the participation by citizens in all decision-making processes.

Although Gorbachev made a distinct move towards the West, especially the U.S.A., in his foreign policy and although he was also willing to make western experience accessible for the Soviet Union in the field of state and social policy, he still rejected an adaption of the western social model, not only for political reasons but reasons of principle as well. He did not shift his position in this respect up to 1991.

Consequently, Gorbachev wanted to change the system fundamentally. This change was intended to go beyond what earlier attempts at reform, especially under Khrushchev, had strived for. This is what glasnost is all about, lifting the veil of lies and reticence, of half-truths and repression that had covered and paralyzed the country for decades. In addition to this, for Gorbachev, perestroika was not a finished concept which only had to be implemented. He really proceeded from the capacity and necessity for the development of this concept, because he drafted only rough contours and reacted to and incorporated changes as they happened.

Nevertheless, some essential features characterizing the identity of a socialist society, which Gorbachev regarded as the heritage of Leninism [2] were to be preserved. In essence this meant that "democratic centralism" should remain the basic organizing instrument of policy in society's development. Thus, the abolition of the leading role of the Communist Party was not considered in the first few years of perestroika, and even in 1989, after its claim to leadership was revoked, Gorbachev still believed that the Communist Party could and had to maintain its dominant position through other, democratic methods. For this reason, his attitude towards a multi-party system in the Soviet Union was always ambivalent. In the beginning he rejected such a system, later he regarded it as unnecessary [3]. Gorbachev made a strict distinction between a variety of political and contradictory interests. He regarded the former as legitimate, while the latter seemed rather dubious to him.

Gorbachev was also far removed from abolishing democratic centralism in the economy. It is true that he was against a strict, detailed planning of the whole economy and the transformation of enterprises and individual producers into pure recipients of orders. The idea of the market, which had previously been treated as an equivalent of capitalism, had been part of the array of perestroika since 1987, yet it was not recognized as the primary instrument for regulating the economy. The enterprises were to remain dependent on the state through state commissions. [4] However, the so-called social ownership of the most important means of production, the second major cornerstone of Marxism-Leninism beside the leading role of the Communist Party, was to remain unassailed in the sense of legal power of disposition. Here there would only be new ways for producers and enterprises to use the system of social ownership.

UTOPIANISM OF PERESTROIKA AS THE REASON FOR ITS FAILURE

If one considers the reasons for the failure of perestroika as a concept of reform, the fact that it came too late is surely of no importance either. As it is known, Gorbachev attributed great significance to the timeliness of changes for a successful reform of the Stalinist system and for the survival of socialism and its advocates. This is expressed in his 1989 Berlin statement concerning the old GDR-leadership. He laid claim to good timing for himself, yet today it is certainly clear that the time factor was insignificant as far as perestroika was concerned. There was no chance that it would have succeeded at an earlier point in time either.

Neither can the reason for its failure be found in the resistance or unwillingness to carry it through on the part of its opponents or the subordinate bodies of management right down to the people, who refused an idea which, as such, was good. In the context of attendant circumstances and contrary tendencies, the value and content of the idea and practice of perestroika surely constitutes a field of subject matter requiring detailed analysis. However, in order to prove their practical suitability, political ideas have to be subject to the criterion of realizability. If they are not accepted by reality, then it is certainly not reality's fault.

What led to the failure of perestroika as a concept of reform was mainly its contradictory ideological and conceptual base, namely the intention to change the existing socialist system fundamentally and yet not abolish it. Gorbachev was committed to the "matter of socialism" as an alternative social system to capitalism. He only partially tried to get out of the aura of Marxism-Leninism. It is true that allowances must be made for his opposition to a persistent dogmatization of this ideological system. He also practiced a different selection of traditional thoughts and views. He no longer applied or even discarded central ideas which had previously been a basis of political activity.

This, for example, not only concerned the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat. He also turned against a pronounced separation of the party elite from the common people as Lenin's theory instructs. He attributed more significance to other, practically orientated concepts, such as Lenin's New Economic Policy in the twenties. [5]

Despite this, it has to be noted that Gorbachev did not call into question Marxism-Leninism as an ideology and a theory. He repeatedly referred to Lenin as the founder of the Soviet Union and he affirmed his philosophical visions and his political skills. Perestroika remained above all a new practical concepts of shaping socialism

with an old ideological basis. Thus, the traditional utopianism of the Marxist-Leninist ideology was integrated into the concept of perestroika.

On the other hand, as far as the methods for putting perestroika into practice are concerned, it must be said that the concept of perestroika differed from its ideological ancestors. Gorbachev also proceeded from the idea of central leadership and management of the process. This is in accordance with the Marxist-Leninist approach. Yet while original Marxism-Leninism showed an internal, though problematical consistency, which according to Popper existed in the connection between utopia and violence, [6] such a connection was absent in Gorbachev's concept of perestroika. His concept was characterized by a far-reaching renunciation of the use of violence. The events in the Baltic states and elsewhere do not change this. In this respect, it is necessary to speak of a double utopianism in the concept of perestroika - a utopianism regarding the aims and methods of achieving them.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to interpret the lack of this internal consistency in Gorbachev's concept of perestroika as it existed in traditional Marxism-Leninism as a deficit. That is just the point which Gorbachev tried to go beyond the former practice. Gorbachev started out from the assumption that socialist society could be reformed. He did not recognize that the most important feature of the socialist society created by Lenin and Stalin was a wholeness caused, above all, by the activity of the communist party. A change in a single field would have brought about a calling-into-question of this constituent feature of the system. However, this would no longer have been a reform, but an abolition of the entire system. Therefore, socialism was not capable of being reformed.

THE PROBLEM OF MOTIVATION FOR PERESTROIKA

Utopianism concerning the aims and means was consequently the decisive reason for the failure of perestroika. Yet this does not completely answer the question. Above all it must be seen that perestroika as an idea and concept was not, of course, a "draft of free political thinking". It was based on the motives of its advocates, political struggles between opponents and supporters, and social conditions. All of these were reflected in this concept and without an analysis of them, no understanding of the failure of perestroika can be reached.

With regard to motivation, it is right to claim, as is done in analyses, that the jeopardized status of the Soviet Union as a superpower constitutes a decisive aspect. [7] The foreign policy and the international role of the Soviet Union had occupied an outstanding position in the thinking of the Soviet leadership, at least since World War II. The Soviet Union considered itself a victorious power, later as a military power with a huge potential in terms of strategic weapons of mass destruction and a huge potential of raw materials, industries and people, which provided the corresponding room for maneuver in the realization of the most diverse interests.

However, at the beginning of the eighties, not only reformers but wider circles in the Soviet leadership as well recognized that this status, based as it was almost exclusively upon the military potential of the Soviet Union, could not be maintained if the previous "political and social strategy" were continued. Contrary to developments during the period of industrialization and reconstruction after World War II, the technical and technological gap between the Soviet Union and the leading western industrial nations, especially the U.S.A., was dramatically growing. On the other hand,

despite Helsinki, armament in the Soviet Union continued to develop in the seventies. The arms industry continued to penetrate the entire economy and increasingly hindered the civil sector resulting in shortages in other areas of society. [8]

Technology was still trying to catch up, and with it the crucial consolidation of the superpower position of the Soviet Union did not take place. The economic decline also threw doubt upon the only pillar of the Soviet Union's status as a superpower, at least in the medium and long term. Hence, it was no accident that even then Minister of Foreign Affairs, the old-Stalinist Gromyko, was one of the intercessors of perestroika. No other method than a fundamental change in strategy could be seen.

The narrowing determination of purpose in foreign policy which underlined perestroika, that is the adhering of the Soviet Union to the status of the second, socialist, superpower, was the most important basis for not principally questioning the ideology and reality of Soviet Union socialism. Gorbachev could not escape this motivation either.

Nevertheless, Gorbachev's intentions here call for a more exact characterization. No doubt Gorbachev was also interested in the maintenance and the strengthening of the international role of the Soviet Union. Yet, on the one hand, the military aspect only possessed a subordinate significance for him. Above all Gorbachev intended to maintain and strengthen the superpower status of the Soviet Union by political means, and in the long term by the development of its economic, technological and social competitiveness. The Soviet Union was to play a constructive role in international relations. That, of course, did not mean the renunciation of the Soviet Union's claim to perceiving and achieving its interests as a superpower.

On the other hand, in Gorbachev's view, changes inside the Soviet Union were not only a stepping-stone. Allowance should be made for the fact that, with the help of an economic rise, he also tried improving the standard of living of the Soviet people, which even lay below the level of most of the other Eastern European countries. It is true that he saw democratization in a close functional connection with economic development, but he also recognized its independent value, including human rights. It was exactly this aspect that prompted former dissidents, for example, Sacharov, to support perestroika, at least at the beginning. [9]

Gorbachev's activities were not characterized by the maintenance and extension of his own power for such personal ends as luxury and privileges. Gorbachev undoubtedly enjoyed his role, as all politicians basically do, and also took delight in the growing respect that the West gave to him. But despite all the tactics, he probably intended to rescue the socialist system because he was convinced that the system was worth rescuing. Gorbachev's belief in the humanistic mission of his perestroika should not be denied.

WAS THERE AN ALTERNATIVE TO PERESTROIKA?

With respect to the aims its advocates set for themselves perestroika failed and, as is now abundantly clear, had to fail, this cannot be said concerning its historical function and its practical effects. Certainly, if one looks at the present decline, especially in the fields of economy and social relations, it would seem right to suggest that it would have been better to avoid perestroika and to move directly towards a market economy and democracy without such a painful detour.

In this regard, it is nevertheless appropriate to consider some historical and political circumstances which constitute the peculiarity of Soviet development. This means considering those conditions under which changes could happen in the Soviet Union at all. It is right that this country, like most of the other countries in the eastern bloc, fell into a deep crisis in the seventies. It was characterized in the vocabulary of perestroika as the stage of stagnation. As the decreasing rates of growth show, [10] socialism in the Soviet Union was coming closer and closer to the limits of its economic capacity, as well. The intended "taking over of scientific and technological progress" did not take place. The standard of living stagnated or even deteriorated, not only in a material sense but also in cultural respects and concerning the broader sphere of life, for instance environmental conditions. [11]

Why did a fundamental social change in the Soviet Union still not come about? Here three aspects are of primary importance. First, the fact that Russian people had been accustomed to a tradition of submissiveness to officials and a low standard of living for centuries must be taken into account. In the form of Tsarism, structures could be maintained for a long time here which had long since become part of the past in most other European countries. The Russian revolution in 1917, which in its phraseology and also partly in its program intended to break with the authoritarian structures and social misery of the Tsarist past, finally established relations that were entirely a continuation of that past. [12] Although there were always critical intellectuals who opposed it, often consciously risking draconian punishment, the behavior of the overwhelming majority of people was characterized by adjustment and subordination. Political repression and economic and social grievances were part of the Russian people's daily life and were not considered unusual in any way.

In addition, it is important to remember that in the year 1985 there was no dramatic decline in economic and social development in the Soviet Union. [13] Here, as well, the situation was quite different from that in other socialist countries. Hence, for instance in Poland, where the quality of life was traditionally higher, after a stage of undoubtedly problematical stability, an abrupt decline took place and caused people to riot. In distinction from this, the Soviet economy basically continued to provide that low standard of living which the people had faced for a long time.

A riot by the people was unthinkable in 1985. Yet, this kind of spontaneous pressure for change "from below" would have been crucial for a basic change of the society instead of a restructuring, as classic revolutions have shown. These aspects were mainly responsible for the need for a certain period of transformation in the development of the Soviet Union towards the market and democracy.

Nevertheless, there is one more reason why perestroika "only" took place in the Soviet Union in 1985. It concerns the political situation of the Soviet Union at that time. There was no opposition movement which was able to lead a political uprising, let alone initiate it. The control of the people by those in power was total. The majority of the dissidents were either in prison or in exile at home or abroad. Their effect on the people was relatively limited.

Moreover, the balance of power between reformers and opponents was still entirely different at that time. Though broad groups of Soviet leadership argued in favor of perestroika, it was obvious that there were great differences of opinion concerning the depth of the intended changes. Some of the leadership pleaded only verbally in favor of changes. The majority wanted them to be strictly limited. The group of the real reform forces was small.

Of course most of the reformers did not intend to remove socialism and move towards market and democracy at that time. This would not even have been possible on account of the existing situation, especially the balance of power. Even if it had been considered, a political coup by reformers would have been nipped in the bud. The Soviet Union could have been thrown back years in its development. The possible effects of this on the development in Europe and the world are difficult to imagine. So, much as market and real democracy were already desirable at this time, there was no chance of them being put into effect. So far, perestroika, regardless of the aims of its advocates and its practical course, did possess some historical justification and political credibility for a certain period of time. [14]

PAVING THE WAY BETWEEN INTELLECTUAL AND POLITICAL OPENNESS AND ECONOMIC COLLAPSE

Another question is that of the practical course of perestroika, what could be expected of it and to what extent it met these expectations? As far as expectations are concerned, it was correct to be reserved at first, because of the intended aims and existing circumstances. Yet as developments progressed, the real necessities became more and more apparent. They consisted in the establishment of a market economy and truly democratic structures in the Soviet Union, as well. Therefore, the question which has to be asked is whether perestroika paved the way for these structures or whether it slowed up this development.

In general, it might be said that perestroika was characterized as hardly any another comparable process of transition in the history of a country hitherto has been, by an extraordinary combination of achievement and deficit, of progress and relapse.

The economic and social area has to be considered a complete failure caused by the disastrous economic policy during perestroika. First, real economic reforms were not undertaken before 1988, that is, three years after the proclamation of perestroika. Then new legal regulations, like the law concerning state-owned firms, were so ambiguous that they by no means promoted the autonomy of the firms, but instead made arbitrary decisions of management possible alongside the command economy. Again and again necessary decisions were delayed and postponed. Finally, in 1990 when radical moves in the form of the 500-day-program were created, they were rejected by Gorbachev.

At the same time, within the framework of a new social policy, the money in circulation got out of control as a result of pay increases which were not based on the intensification of productivity and by a simultaneous adhering to prices which contradicted the demands of the market. This caused a dramatic worsening in the shortage of food and other basic products. [15] Of course, this also shows that much greater attention was given to the social needs of people in the period of perestroika than had previously been the case. One could even say that these needs were recognized for the first time ever, because they had formerly existed in either the state propaganda or their fulfillment was more a means to a political end.

However, in the long run this kind of social policy diminished the prospects for a market economy and democracy rather than strengthening them. Now in the Soviet Union there will have to be a change in thinking and general acceptance that achievements in the economy have priority over improvements in the standard of living. Thus, in the economic and social field, a pioneering function of perestroika is out

of the question. Moreover, the conditions for a transformation from a command economy to a market economy, which poses a complicated venture anyway because there is no historical parallel, were made even more difficult.

In the field of politics, progress and relapse in the process of perestroika lie particularly close together. Here, too, there were delays as well as critical stages and set-backs. This, for instance, concerns the late acceptance of civil movements and parties outside the Communist Party, which therefore still had to work in a grey area between legality and illegality for a long time. [16] A break-through towards setting up a constitutional state could not be achieved either. Therefore, it was not until 1989 that an institution was created in the form of the committee for the supervision of the constitution which was intended to fulfill functions of control over state bodies.

Gorbachev's intensified turning towards the conservative groups in the Soviet leadership in 1990 also constituted an extremely critical moment in perestroika. When perestroika got into crisis in 1989, there emerged a chance and a necessity to go the way of change more resolutely, as many then demanded. At that time, Gorbachev's turn towards the conservatives no longer corresponded, by any means, to the role of a mediator between the radical reformers and opponents of the reform which he had played up till then.

The most serious mistakes in the political field were probably committed in connection with the increasing striving of different republics for self-government. The problem of nationalities, which occupies a priority position in the field of policy in the multi-national state of the Soviet Union, was underestimated for a long time. The legitimate rights of the various republics were to get late recognition by means of the Union treaty in the summer of 1991. Here, a legacy appeared which has not on any account been overcome by the declarations of independence by the republics. It is more likely that new tensions have to be expected in this field. [17] On the other hand, it would be wrong to ignore the fact that in the political arena perestroika triggered developments without which a transition towards a market economy and democracy would not have taken place at all in the Soviet Union. This primarily concerns the basic conditions established in Soviet foreign policy. The "new thinking" with which Gorbachev transformed the foreign policy of the Soviet Union has also led to changes in the attitudes of the western states following their initial mistrust and hesitation. This has had a positive influence on the international climate. Disarmament, which of course was born out of economic difficulties, became a central strategic concern of Soviet foreign policy. Even if it did not bring about the conditions which the U.S.A. and other western countries called for before they would consider extensive cooperation and aid, especially in the economy, work between these countries was intensified in many fields or even initiated, in some cases. [18]

The greatest achievement of perestroika in the field of foreign policy is undoubtedly the abandonment of any restriction on the sovereignty of the states of the Warsaw Pact, the so-called Breshnev-doctrine. Thus, it also created the most important condition for a reunification of Germany. The reality of 1988/89 certainly had to be accepted. Yet under the aspect of the sacrifice of Soviet interests, there was considerable resistance on the part of conservative groups and this had to be overcome by the reformers.

Although by no means intended by Gorbachev, as already indicated, the role and effectiveness of the Communist Party was gradually weakened, (almost imperceptibly in domestic policy), in a way that could not have been better. This development has to be considered important for the peaceful course of changes and the

wretched failure of the attempted coup. Although without resistance, the people could articulate their real interests in the most varied forms and on different occasions.

However, in domestic policy, the most significant positive results of perestroika may be noted in the field of intellectual and political development. A wide-ranging intellectual openness took place starting with a critical questioning of the Soviet Union's own history. The crimes of Stalinism were brought home to both the political rulers and the people. This was a taboo which had accompanied the country for decades and left its socio-psychological marks. Though a final conclusion, if such a thing can be achieved, has not yet been attained in this field, the mental breaking with the past poses an important condition for the following practical changes.

Intellectual openness also took place with regard to other ideological and political values. Lenin's thesis that there must be something wrong with your views and activities if your political opponent praises you was given up. In concrete terms, western values were generally no longer regarded as contrary to the interests of Soviet society. On the other hand, though not promoted in every respect, but at least tolerated, there was a reception of these values which made it possible to expand the overall sphere of ideas. It is not wrong to characterize Glasnost as the real achievement of perestroika. [19] Concerning the attitude of the people, a mobilization has taken place despite all remaining lethargy. The experience had to be grasped in the process of the failure of perestroika that the commitment of the individual is absolutely necessary to solve social and individual problems.

Hence, in the end, the contradiction of the process remains: it truly failed regarding its goals, but, to a certain extent it was unavoidable for the Soviet Union and despite all erroneous trends and critical moments, it paved the way for a market economy and democracy.

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