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MIKHAIL GORBACHEV

**Perestroika and Glasnost, 2000**

Mikhail Gorbachev (b. 1931) was the head (General Secretary) of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1985-1991) and president of the Soviet Union (1988-1991). He led the party and the state through the wrenching changes of its liberalization, democratization, and demise. Beginning in 1985, Gorbachev envisioned the democratic reform

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Source: Gorbachev, *On My Country and the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 55-61.

of the party and state. His formula was *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (opening). In this selection from his memoir, he describes that effort.

In what ways was the democratization of the Soviet Union, as described here, different from that of Argentina (see chapter 26, document 8 and the previous document)?

#### THINKING HISTORICALLY

In what ways does Gorbachev connect his democratization with the ideas and efforts of others? In what ways does he attribute it to the particular context of the Soviet Union and the world in the late 1980s?

There has been a continuing debate over when reform actually began in our country. Politicians and journalists have been trying to locate the exact point at which all our dramatic changes began. Some assert that reforms in Russia did not really begin until 1992.

The basis for reform was laid by Khrushchev.<sup>1</sup> His break with the repressive policies of Stalinism was a heroic feat of civic action. Khrushchev also tried, though without much success, to make changes in the economy. Significant attempts were made within the framework of the so-called Kosygin reforms. Then came a long period of stagnation and a new attempt by Yuri Andropov<sup>2</sup> to improve the situation in our society. An obvious sign that the times were ripe for change was the activity of the dissidents. They were suppressed and expelled from the country, but their moral stand and their proposals for change (for example, the ideas of Andrei Sakharov<sup>3</sup>) played a considerable role in creating the spiritual preconditions for perestroika.

Of course external factors were also important. Thus the Prague Spring of 1968 sowed the seeds of profound thought and reflection in our society. The invasion of Czechoslovakia, dictated by fear of the "democratic infection," was not only a crude violation of the sovereignty and rights of the Czechoslovak people. It had the effect, for years, of putting the brakes on moves toward change, although change was long overdue both in our country and throughout the so-called socialist camp. I should also acknowledge the role of such phenomena as Willy Brandt's<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Nikita Khrushchev, First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1953 to 1964; responsible for early de-Stalinization reforms. See chapter 26, selections 4, 5, and 6. [Ed.]

<sup>2</sup> General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from November 1982 until February 1984. [Ed.]

<sup>3</sup> Soviet nuclear scientist who became a human rights activist. [Ed.]

<sup>4</sup> Mayor of West Berlin 1957–1966, Chancellor of West Germany 1969–1974, and leader of the socialist Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) 1964–1987. His Eastern policy was an effort to improve relations with communist East Germany, Poland, and the Soviet Union. [Ed.]

“Eastern policy” and the search for new avenues toward social progress by those who were called Euro-Communists. All this contributed to deeper reflection in our country, reflection on the values of democracy, freedom, and peace and the ways to achieve them.

Thus we see that attempts at change were made, quite a few of them in fact. But none of them produced results. This is not surprising. After all, none of these attempts touched the essence of the system—property relations, the power structure, and the monopoly of the party on political and intellectual life. The suppression of dissidence continued in spite of everything.

Clearly what was needed was not particular measures in a certain area, even if they were substantial, but rather an entirely different policy, a new political path. Since early 1985, especially after the April plenum of the CPSU Central Committee,<sup>5</sup> this kind of policy began to be formulated. A new course was taken.

Today, in retrospect, one can only be amazed at how quickly and actively our people, the citizens of our country, supported that new course. Apathy and indifference toward public life were overcome. This convinced us that change was vitally necessary. Society awakened.

Perestroika was born out of the realization that problems of internal development in our country were ripe, even overripe, for a solution. New approaches and types of action were needed to escape the downward spiral of crisis, to normalize life, and to make a breakthrough to qualitatively new frontiers. It can be said that to a certain extent perestroika was a result of a rethinking of the Soviet experience since October.<sup>6</sup>

The vital need for change was dictated also by the following consideration. It was obvious that the whole world was entering a new stage of development—some call it the postindustrial age, some the information age. But the Soviet Union had not yet passed through the industrial stage. It was lagging further and further behind those processes that were making a renewal in the life of the world community possible. Not only was a leap forward in technology needed but fundamental change in the entire social and political process.

Of course it cannot be said that at the time we began perestroika we had everything thought out. In the early stages we all said, including myself, that perestroika was a continuation of the October revolution. Today I believe that that assertion contained a grain of truth but also an element of delusion.

The truth was that we were trying to carry out fundamental ideas that had been advanced by the October revolution but had not been realized: overcoming people's alienation from government and property, giving

<sup>5</sup> The Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was the governing body between party congress meetings. [Ed.]

<sup>6</sup> October 1917, the Bolshevik Revolution. [Ed.]

power to the people (and taking it away from the bureaucratic upper echelons), implanting democracy, and establishing true social justice.

The delusion was that at the time I, like most of us, assumed this could be accomplished by improving and refining the existing system. But as experience accumulated, it became clear that the crisis that had paralyzed the country in the late 1970s and early 1980s was systemic and not the result of isolated aberrations. The logic of how matters developed pointed to the need to penetrate the system to its very foundations and change it, not merely refine or perfect it. We were already talking about a gradual shift to a social market economy, to a democratic political system based on rule of law and the full guarantee of human rights.

This transition turned out to be extremely difficult and complicated, more complicated than it had seemed to us at first. Above all, this was because the totalitarian system possessed tremendous inertia. There was resistance from the party and government structures that constituted the solid internal framework of that system. The nomenklatura encouraged resistance. And this is understandable: Since it held the entire country in its hands, it would have to give up its unlimited power and privileges. Thus the entire perestroika era was filled with struggles—concealed at first and then more open, more fully exposed to public view—between the forces for change and those who opposed it, those who, especially after the first two years, simply began to sabotage change.

The complexity of the struggle stemmed from the fact that in 1985 the entire society—politically, ideologically, and spiritually—was still in the thrall of old customs and traditions. Great effort was required to overcome these traditions, as mentioned above. There was another factor. Destroying the old system would have been senseless if we did not simultaneously lay the foundations for a new life. And this was genuinely unexplored territory. The six-year perestroika era was a time filled with searching and discovery, gains and losses, breakthroughs in thought and action, as well as mistakes and oversights. The attempted coup in August 1991 interrupted perestroika. After that there were many developments, but they were along different lines, following different intentions. Still, in the relatively short span of six years we succeeded in doing a great deal. The reforms in China, incidentally, have been going on since 1974, and their most difficult problems still remain unsolved.

What specifically did we accomplish as a result of the stormy years of perestroika? The foundations of the totalitarian system were eliminated. Profound democratic changes were begun. Free general elections were held for the first time, allowing real choice. Freedom of the press and a multiparty system were guaranteed. Representative bodies of government were established, and the first steps toward a separation of powers were taken. Human rights (previously in our country these were only "so-called," reference to them invariably made only in scornful

quotation marks) now became an unassailable principle. And freedom of conscience was also established.

Movement began toward a multistructured, or mixed, economy providing equality of rights among all forms of property. Economic freedom was made into law. The spirit of enterprise began to gain strength, and processes of privatization and the formation of joint stock companies got under way. Within the framework of our new land law, the peasantry was reborn and private farmers made their appearance. Millions of hectares of land were turned over to both rural and urban inhabitants. The first privately owned banks also came on the scene. The different nationalities and peoples were given the freedom to choose their own course of development. Searching for a democratic way to reform our multinational state, to transform it from a unitary state in practice into a national federation, we reached the threshold at which a new union treaty was to be signed, based on the recognition of the sovereignty of each republic along with the preservation of a common economic, social, and legal space that was necessary for all, including a common defense establishment.

The changes within our country inevitably led to a shift in foreign policy. The new course of perestroika predetermined renunciation of stereotypes and the confrontational methods of the past. It allowed for a rethinking of the main parameters of state security and the ways to ensure it. . . .

In other words, the foundations were laid for normal, democratic, and peaceful development of our country and its transformation into a normal member of the world community.

These are the decisive results of perestroika. Today, however, looking back through the prism of the past few years and taking into account the general trends of world development today, it seems insufficient to register these as the only results. Today it is evidently of special interest to state not only *what* was done but also *how* and *why* perestroika was able to achieve its results, and what its mistakes and miscalculations were.

Above all, *perestroika would have been simply impossible if there had not been a profound and critical reexamination not only of the problems confronting our country but a rethinking of all realities—both national and international.*

Previous conceptions of the world and its developmental trends and correspondingly, of our country's place and role in the world were based, as we have said, on dogmas deeply rooted in our ideology, which essentially did not permit us to pursue a realistic policy. These conceptions had to be shattered and fundamentally new views worked out regarding our country's development and the surrounding world.

This task turned out to be far from simple. We had to renounce beliefs that for decades had been considered irrefutable truths, to reexamine the very methods and principles of leadership and action, indeed to

rethink our surroundings entirely on a scientific basis (and not according to schemes inherited from ideological biases).

The product of this effort was the new thinking, which became the basis for all policy—both foreign and domestic—during perestroika. The point of departure for the new thinking was an attempt to evaluate everything not from the viewpoint of narrow class interests or even national interests but from the broader perspective: that of giving priority to the interests of all humanity with consideration for the increasingly apparent wholeness of the world, the interdependence of all countries and peoples, the humanist values formed over centuries.

The practical work of perestroika was to *renounce stereotypical ideological thinking and the dogmas of the past. This required a fresh view of the world and of ourselves with no preconceptions, taking into account the challenges of the present and the already evident trends of the future in the third millennium.*

During perestroika, and often now as well, the initiators of perestroika have been criticized for the absence of a “clear plan” for change. The habit developed over decades of having an all-inclusive regimentation of life. But the events of the perestroika years and of the subsequent period have plainly demonstrated the following: *At times of profound, fundamental change in the foundations of social development it is not only senseless but impossible to expect some sort of previously worked out “model” or a clear-cut outline of the transformations that will take place. This does not mean, however, the absence of a definite goal for the reforms, a distinct conception of their content and the main direction of their development.*

All this was present in perestroika: a profound democratization of public life and a guarantee of freedom of social and political choice. These goals were proclaimed and frequently reaffirmed. This did not exclude but presupposed the necessity to change one’s specific reference points at each stage as matters proceeded and to engage in a constant search for optimal solutions.

An extremely important conclusion follows from the experience of perestroika: Even in a society formed under totalitarian conditions, democratic change is possible by *peaceful evolutionary means*. The problem of revolution and evolution, of the role and place of reforms in social development, is one of the eternal problems of history. In its inner content perestroika of course was a revolution. But in its form it was an evolutionary process, a process of reform.

Historically the USSR had grown ripe for a profound restructuring much earlier than the mid-1980s. But if we had not decided to begin this restructuring at the time we did, even though we were quite late in doing so, an explosion would have taken place in the USSR, one of tremendous destructive force. It would certainly have been called a revolution, but it would have been the catastrophic result of irresponsible leadership.

In the course of implementing change we did not succeed in avoiding bloodshed altogether. But that was a consequence solely of resistance by the opponents of perestroika in the upper echelons of the nomenklatura. On the whole the change from one system to another took place peacefully and by evolutionary means. Our having chosen a policy course that was supported from below by the masses made this peaceful transition possible. And our policy of glasnost played a decisive role in mobilizing the masses and winning their support.

Radical reforms in the context of the Soviet Union could only have been initiated from above by the leadership of the party and the country. This was predetermined by the very "nature" of the system—supercentralized management of all public life. This can also be explained by the inert condition of the masses, who had become used to carrying out orders and decisions handed down from above.

From the very beginning of the changes our country's leadership assigned primary importance to open communication with the people, including direct disclosure in order to explain the new course. Without the citizens' understanding and support, without their participation, it would not have been possible to move from dead center. That is why we initiated the policies of perestroika and glasnost simultaneously.

Like perestroika itself, glasnost made its way with considerable difficulty. The nomenklatura on all levels, which regarded the strictest secrecy and protection of authorities from criticism from below as the holy of holies of the regime, opposed glasnost in every way they could, both openly and secretly, trampling its first shoots in the local press. Even among the most sincere supporters of perestroika, the tradition over many years of making everything a secret made itself felt. But it was precisely glasnost that awakened people from their social slumber, helped them overcome indifference and passivity and become aware of the stake they had in change and of its important implications for their lives. Glasnost helped us to explain and promote awareness of the new realities and the essence of our new political course. In short, without glasnost there would have been no perestroika.

*The question of the relation between ends and means is one of the key aspects of politics and of political activity.* If the means do not correspond to the ends, or, still worse, if the means contradict the ends, this will lead to setbacks and failure. The Soviet Union's experience is convincing evidence of this. When we began perestroika as a process of democratic change, we had to ensure that the means used to carry out these changes were also democratic.

In essence, glasnost became the means for drawing people into political activity, for including them in the creation of a new life, and this, above all, corresponded to the essence of perestroika. Glasnost not only created conditions for implementing the intended reforms but also made it possible to overcome attempts to sabotage the policy of change.



We are indebted to glasnost for a profound psychological transformation in the public consciousness toward democracy, freedom, and the humanist values of civilization. Incidentally, this was one of the guarantees that the fundamental gains of this period would be irreversible.

*Perestroika confirmed once again that the normal, democratic development of society rules out universal secrecy as a method of administration. Democratic development presupposes glasnost—that is, openness, freedom of information for all citizens and freedom of expression by them of their political, religious, and other views and convictions, freedom of criticism in the fullest sense of the word.*

Why, then, did perestroika not succeed in achieving all its goals? The answer primarily involves the question of “harmonization” between political and economic change.

The dominant democratic aspect of perestroika meant that the accent was inevitably placed on political reform. The dialectic of our development during those years was such that serious changes in the economic sphere proved to be impossible without emancipating society politically, without ensuring freedom—that is, breaking the political structures of totalitarianism. And this was accomplished. But economic change lagged behind political change, and we did not succeed in developing economic change to the full extent.