

GLASNOST: ITS MULTIPLE ROLES IN GORBACHEV'S REFORM STRATEGY

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Glasnost has become a household word in Western discussions of the Soviet Union, indeed an all-embracing symbol of the entire Gorbachev era. Indiscriminately applied to virtually every aspect of Mikhail Gorbachev's policies, and used as a synonym for *perestroika* (restructuring) itself, both the word and the policies associated with it deserve more careful examination, for they hold the key to an understanding of what Gorbachev's reforms are and are not about.

Perhaps best translated as "public disclosure," with its simultaneous connotation of candor and publicity, *glasnost* is not so much an end in itself as a central instrument in Gorbachev's larger campaign for reform. It reflects a recognition that building support at home and abroad for major changes in Soviet domestic and foreign policy requires a less secretive approach to Soviet reality. This entails a more candid acknowledgement of Soviet shortcomings and errors and an expansion of the boundaries of public discussion, although by no means an abrogation of its limits. At bottom, it reflects a serious rethinking of how the Soviet leadership should relate to its own population as well as to the wider international community.

The three years since Gorbachev became General Secretary have been marked by a gradual widening of the role and scope of *glasnost*. This trend is closely connected to the progressive radicalization of Gorbachev's conception of reform. Since the summer of 1986 Gorbachev has expressed a growing realization that the problems he inherited are more complex, and the obstacles to reform more daunting, than he initially appreciated. His original focus on economic reform, with its emphasis on *uskorenie* (acceleration) was progressively supplanted by a recognition that more far-reaching structural changes were essential to achieve a revitalization of the Soviet system. His campaign for *perestroika* (restructuring) is a call for far-reaching departures from prevailing practices and norms in virtually every area of Soviet life. Indeed, in July 1986 Gorbachev described "restructuring" as nothing short of revolution, encompassing "not only the economy but all other sides of society's life: social relations, the political system, the spiritual and ideological sphere, the style and work methods of the party and of all our cadres . . . I would equate restructuring with revolution . . . genuine revolution in the minds and hearts of people . . ."

Glasnost is a central instrument of this effort. "We need *glasnost*," Gorbachev put it, "as we need the air." But the novelty and strategic significance of this instrument derive from his recognition that Soviet society has reached a level of maturity that requires a new approach to its governance. The Soviet people, and particularly the educated middle classes, can no longer be treated as the passive objects of official policy, but have to be brought into some form of partnership.

Khrushchev launched the process of inclusion — a shift, however erratic, from the centralized, coercive statism of the Stalinist system to a more conciliatory and flexible approach to social forces. Gorbachev seeks to extend it further. His advocacy of *glasnost*, as of a cultural liberalization and "democratization," is not merely a tactical device to secure the support of the scientific and cultural intelligentsia for his economic and political program, or a public relations effort aimed at world opinion. It reflects a profound recognition that successful reform depends on redefining the relationship of state and society.

The espousal of *glasnost* stands at the center of this effort. At one level it is, of course, a policy of preemption, intended to reduce the reliance of the Soviet population on foreign and unofficial sources of information. As the new Soviet leadership clearly recognized, the dreary uniformity of the Soviet media had lost it both attention and credibility. On domestic as well as international issues, foreign sources of information ranging from radio broadcasts to gossip filled the void created by official silence.

The Chernobyl disaster gave enormous impetus to the advocates of change in information policy. The fact that the Soviet people first learned of a major domestic catastrophe with far-reaching implications for their own welfare from foreign broadcasts, and that the news was initially denied by their own government, was a major political embarrassment. It dramatized as never before the high costs of traditional Soviet secretiveness, both domestically and internationally. It demonstrated the extent to which new technologies had fostered a revolution in communications which was undermining the Soviet state's monopoly over information and breaching the "Iron Curtain" which had long insulated the Soviet population from the outside world. After Chernobyl, Gorbachev became more determined to expand and enliven the flow of information in order to enhance his credibility at home and abroad.

In its early phases *glasnost* meant a more candid discussion of troublesome subjects, including subjects previously absent from the Soviet media. Accidents and disasters now found their way into the Soviet press, along with discussions of an increasing range of social pathologies, from drug addiction to prostitution, whose very existence had long been denied. Even nationalist demonstrations in Alma-Ata were shown on Soviet television screens, giving unprecedented attention to political discontent.

Glasnost has evolved into an instrument for consolidating Gorbachev's political position. The enormity of the task he has undertaken, and the limited support on which it is based, have compelled the Soviet leader to seek new ways of mobilizing support for his programs. In the process he has turned to

the media as a novel and influential political resource. The relatively recent spread of television to the remotest corners of the Soviet Union has rendered obsolete the entire *agitprop* system that was long the linchpin of Soviet political socialization. Furthermore, industrialization and increasing educational attainments have transformed the passive and inarticulate peasant society of the Stalin era into an urban society with an increasingly articulate and assertive middle class.

Gorbachev is the first Soviet leader to appreciate the way in which new technologies and new social forces impinge on Soviet political life, and to recognize the potential power of the mass media in reaching this new "attentive public." By placing supporters in key positions in ideological and cultural institutions within the Party, or as editors of influential journals such as *Kommunist* and *Pravda*, and by making skillful use of Soviet television, he has sought to use the media to shape the terms of debate over reform to his political advantage and to compensate for his relative weakness in the more traditional organs of power.

Moreover, although Gorbachev's use of the media to attack and expose political opponents has a long tradition in Soviet political history, it is a double-edged sword with potentially broader implications. *Glasnost* encourages an expanded and more independent role for the media in exposing abuses of power and position by officials. For example, by promoting serious investigative reporting by journalists, it not only supports the principle of political accountability but also provides an instrument for holding officials accountable for their actions. These efforts have encountered sharp resistance at the local level. Nevertheless, it is of particular importance that *glasnost* has extended, in however tentative a fashion, to the first exposes of abuses by the police and by the KGB and to discussion of the misuse of psychiatry in handling political dissidence.

Glasnost extends to the treatment of the Soviet past as well as the present, and has been invoked on behalf of a more critical assessment of the Stalin and Brezhnev eras. The process of de-Stalinization, interrupted and partially reversed under Brezhnev, has regained momentum and provoked some of the sharpest public debates of the Gorbachev era. Two important cultural events of the past year — the publication of Anatoly Rybakov's long suppressed novel *Children of the Arbat* and the screening of Tengiz Abuladze's powerful film *Repentance* — involve unprecedentedly frank and powerful evocations of the crimes of the Stalin era. At the same time, the literary and cultural journals that review these works have become a forum for major public debates with clear political ramifications. A Soviet review of the film, *Repentance*, illustrates the new functions of public criticism:

Don't we sometimes hear, even from young people, the proposition, at bottom a monstrous one, that in the past, under Stalin, there was greater order? But what kind of order was it? The people's life took its normal course, to be sure, and many people still retain

bright memories of that time of economic development and construction. They are pages of our life, of our history. But as far as the order that supposedly reigned during the repressions is concerned, the film gives an exhaustive answer on this score . . . We know too many cases in which an exposed evil was, after a while, declared to be a good again, and the graves of criminals were once more decorated as seemly monuments. . .

Gorbachev's endorsement of a fuller and more accurate account of earlier Soviet history has also encouraged the publication of previously unpublished memoirs and documents which shed new light on highly sensitive historical events, such as the forcible collectivization of agriculture, the assassination of Sergei Kirov in 1934, and the Great Purges that followed. It has also invited a re-examination of the alternatives to Stalin. One consequence is the emergence of Lenin's associates and the later victims of Stalinism — Bukharin, Trotsky, Zinoviev, and others — from decades of oblivion and calumny, though not by any means as heroes. But notwithstanding Gorbachev's urging that "forgotten names and blank spots" in Soviet history be filled in, the new official history, including the version presented by the General Secretary himself on the occasion of the 70th anniversary celebrations of the October Revolution, remains tendentious, contradictory, and contested. Moreover, others within the leadership have been notably less sympathetic to what they view as an unwarranted tendency to minimize the achievements of the past.

If one motive in the unrewriting of history is the plain quest for truth, for Gorbachev and his followers historical revisionism also serves more instrumental goals. By removing the layers of varnish that had long prettified the Soviet past and present, and by highlighting previously ignored failures of earlier Soviet policies, *glasnost* delegitimizes certain features of Stalinism, demonstrates the urgency of reform, and serves to validate fresh approaches.

Historical revisionism has its parallel in the new approaches to Soviet culture. The most far-reaching and tangible of Gorbachev's reforms have been the publication of long suppressed poems and novels, and the public screening of controversial films. They represent a form of reconciliation with the intelligentsia and an expression of a more tolerant and ecumenical approach to Soviet culture. The reappraisal of the contributions of such writers and poets as Mikhail Bulgakov, Boris Pasternak, Marina Tsvetaeva, and Anna Akhmatova, once scorned for their deviation from "socialist realism," and the publication of works like *Dr. Zhivago*, extend the boundaries of licit literature to figures and works of art previously outside them. Overtures to artists who emigrated seek to reunite the two streams of Russian culture at home and abroad.

During the cultural thaw of the Khrushchev era, the personal intervention of Khrushchev himself was required to authorize the publication of novels such as Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. By contrast, current approaches involve a partial devolution of cultural decision-making from the center. Editors of journals and newspapers and directors of film

studios and theaters now have responsibility for the contents of what they produce. This has tended to promote greater diversity in the cultural realm and also narrowed the degree of direct state intervention in the arts and letters.

Glasnost is also perceived by the present leadership as an instrument of feedback, allowing it to monitor the pulse of Soviet society. The new regime has given support to significantly wider use of surveys and opinion polls and has recognized the critical role of sociological research in understanding attitudes and behavior. As Gorbachev has put it: "We regard the development of *glasnost* as a way of accumulating the various diverse ideas and views which reflect the interests of all strata, of all trades and professions in Soviet society. We won't be able to advance if we don't check how our policy responds to criticism, especially criticism from below . . ." Clearly seeking to defend himself against the charge that the West might use criticism to discredit socialism, he insists: ". . . I myself do not fear criticism. A critical review of our experience is a sign of strength, not weakness . . . Criticism is a bitter medicine, but the ills that plague society make it a necessity. You make a wry face, but you swallow it."

In broadening the boundaries of legitimate public discussion, *glasnost* has opened the door to a transformation of Soviet ideology itself, most visible in the Party's ideological journal, *Kommunist*. Lenin's conception of a single truth and an infallible approach to problems no longer holds sway; its articles present diverse and even conflicting approaches to current problems, and readers' letters often include sharp critiques of their key points. The very introduction of formal debate on Soviet television, with its presentation of two diametrically opposed positions on major issues of the day without any final resolution, is a dramatic departure from long-standing behavior.

Gorbachev clearly aligned himself with the advocates of ideological flexibility at the January 1987 Central Committee Plenum when he criticized what he called a "schematic and dogmatic approach" to Party ideology. He attacked the persistence of theoretical concepts that remained at the level of the 1930s and the 1940s while the country's needs had fundamentally changed, the disappearance of vigorous debates and creative ideas, the absence of competition and conflict, and the absolutizing of particular points of view which ought to have been treated as contingent and context-dependent. And he explicitly criticized portrayals of Soviet society that denied the diversity of groups and interests, and the possibility of conflicts among them, as a denial of social dynamism itself.

This speech echoed a striking article that had appeared in late 1986 in *Izvestia* calling for greater debate and controversy on major issues of the day. "We must get used to the idea that a multiplicity of voices is a natural part of openness," its author had argued.

We must treat diversity normally, as the natural state of the world; not with clenched teeth, as in the past, but normally as an immutable feature of social life . . . We need in the economy and other areas of Soviet life a situation where multiple variants and

alternative solutions are in and of themselves development tools and preconditions for obtaining optimal results, and where the coexistence of two opposing points of view on a single subject is most fruitful.

Reminding his audience of the high price paid in the past for intolerance toward other opinions, the author said: "We must learn to live under democratic conditions."

If *glasnost* serves these multiple purposes in Gorbachev's strategy of reform, it also has a deeper significance. At bottom, *glasnost* is also a symbol of trust. It reflects a recognition by the Soviet leadership of the maturity of the Soviet people, and a partial repudiation of the patronizing notion that only a small elite could be entrusted with truth. It constitutes a potential challenge to the entire Bolshevik conception of a vanguard party, premised as it was on the need for tutelage over backward masses.

It is equally an expression of confidence in the basic legitimacy of the Soviet system and in its leadership, a recognition that the pretense of infallibility is no longer necessary to command popular allegiance and support. Indeed, greater publicity for shortcomings and problems ranging from the shoddy construction of nuclear power plants to the spread of drug addiction is an indispensable precondition for addressing them successfully.

The case for *glasnost* and its intimate connection to the prospects for reform was most eloquently put by Tatyana Zaslavskaya, the reformist sociologist. She argued in a remarkable article in *Pravda*:

If we continue to keep from the people information about the conditions under which they live, say the degree of environmental pollution, the number of industrial accidents, or the extent of crime, we cannot expect them to assume a more active role in economic or in political life. People will trust and support you only if you trust them.

This realization of the interdependence of openness and trust is reflected in Soviet foreign policy as well, and particularly in relations with the United States. Traditional Soviet secretiveness and xenophobia are challenged by the advocates of a more forthcoming approach that is more sensitive to the concerns of potential partners abroad. A series of unprecedented Soviet initiatives manifest this new approach, from the testimony of a young embassy official before a Congressional committee in the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster, to the opening of the Krasnoyarsk radar installation to a group of visiting members of the U.S. Congress, to Soviet agreement to intrusive on-site inspection under the new INF treaty. It also involves opening Soviet television and the pages of the Soviet press to at least occasional presentations by Western political figures and scholars not known for their sympathies to the Soviet regime, from Margaret Thatcher to Richard Pipes.

If *glasnost* has expanded the scope of public discussion and given voice to previously silenced views, there remain nonetheless sharp limits to the range

of topics and points of view which can be expressed publicly. The basic features of the Soviet system — such as the role of public ownership and the monopoly of power by the Communist Party — remain immune to challenge. Leadership politics continue to be largely beyond public scrutiny. The Yeltsin affair demonstrated both the increased and more overt public pressure to extend openness to elite politics, and the desire as well as the ability of the leadership to resist it. While the attacks on Yeltsin at the Moscow Party Committee meeting were published, his own speech at the Central Committee meeting, which led to his ouster, remains secret. Similarly, attacks on the privileges of the political elite have appeared in print but seem to have been stopped.

Foreign and security policy continue to remain “closed zones,” although a few taboos have begun to be breached here as well. In journals of limited circulation or in interviews abroad, Soviet officials and scholars have acknowledged that erroneous policies were pursued in a number of important areas. Questions have been raised regarding Stalin’s approach to Nazism, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, the Katyn massacre, the deployment of the SS-20s in Europe, and the scale of Soviet military expenditures. But these remain individual initiatives, not changes of official policy.

Even military affairs, though largely exempted from public discussion, have begun to receive closer scrutiny. In a round-table discussion reported in *Literaturnaia gazeta*, a group of scientists criticized the drafting of university students, arguing that “our society does not need soldiers more than it needs . . . physicists, biologists, engineers and social scientists.” Even the morality of nuclear weapons has been openly challenged in the press, with a well-known Belorussian writer, Ales’ Adamovich, arguing that “for me there are no military men more courageous and worthier than those who . . . give their military expertise to the antiwar movement.” In both cases senior military spokesmen responded in print, defending Soviet policies and stressing the dangers of pacifism. Although treatment in Soviet media of the war in Afghanistan has expanded and become more candid, there has been no direct challenge to the wisdom of the original Soviet decision to intervene.

Glasnost does not profess to enshrine the principle of freedom of expression. As Gorbachev himself has affirmed, freedom extends only to that which serves the cause of socialism. On the other hand, the boundaries of this novel “socialist pluralism” are fluid and hotly contested. Editors of different journals are willing to take different degrees of risk in publishing unorthodox pieces, while divisions within the political leadership provide some degree of protection to different views. A variety of individuals and groups seek to appropriate or borrow the fig leaf of socialism to push these boundaries of tolerated expression and organization still further. Others seem to have taken the Yeltsin affair as a signal to halt the momentum.

The emergence of a rich variety of unofficial groups and journals concerned with public affairs, and the ambiguity of their status, are testimony to the fluidity and novelty of the present Soviet scene. At one end of the political spectrum, a leading unofficial journal as well as a number of political clubs

have appropriated the very title of *Glasnost* to legitimize their activities. Their fate will serve as a barometer of the reforms in general. At the same time, current policies have elicited a reactionary backlash, most visible in the activities of *Pamiat'* ("memory") which has sought to use *glasnost* on behalf of Great Russian nationalist, anti-Western, and xenophobic policies.

For the United States, *glasnost* must be seen as a welcome development, even if it does not meet the full range of Western concerns. It remains politically bounded and constrained by the nature of the Soviet system. It is dependent on the priorities of particular leaders, unbuttressed by legal guarantees, and vulnerable to reversal in a changed political culture imbued with a strong commitment to control and an intense fear that spontaneity will lead to anarchy. The Soviet regime has had considerable experience at repressing deviance but mighty little in managing diversity. Insofar as this reform is an unnatural act in the Soviet milieu, it would take considerable practice to get to like it and do it well.

To the extent that *glasnost* moves the Soviet Union in the direction of greater openness, responsiveness, and diversity, it can only be applauded and deserves to be encouraged. We should not delude ourselves into expecting that openness is tantamount to liberalization and that it will encourage the expression only of more humane, tolerant, and decent views. But the new information policy offers the Soviet population, in particular the Soviet elite, a more accurate picture of their own country and of the world abroad, as well as more informed input into Soviet policy-making. It also offers some degree of legitimation to assimilation, not only of Western technologies but also Western standards, values, and ideas, provided they can be suitably packaged.

At the same time, it permits us access to a better knowledge of the Soviet Union, thus giving us greater assurance against surprises and a better basis for sound policy. If it gives us greater opportunities than ever before for influencing the Soviet scene, it will also require far greater understanding and sophistication than we have customarily displayed.