

Soviet Political Reform in a Comparative Context

by Mary McAuley

No one is finding it easy to keep pace with developments in today's USSR, with the novelty and speed of the changes, the twists and turns of political struggle. Instant analysis is required; there is little time for reflection. Yet we need to stand back and put day-to-day developments within a wider context if we are to understand what is happening in the Soviet Union. Of course Gorbachev's reform program has its own peculiarly late-1980s and Soviet features, just as the Yugoslav reforms of the early 1950s and the Czechoslovak reforms of 1968 had theirs. But at the same time, the different attempts to move away from the orthodox Stalinist model (or the "command-administrative system," as it is now customarily called) share common features. If we are to discern what is new and different in today's Soviet endeavor, we need to set it against other attempts within the communist world. Our focus, then, is on the reform process in Leninist regimes, and that in the Soviet Union in particular.¹

The Leninist Constitutional Compromise

In any political system, the institutional or "constitutional" arrangements of the system produce particular pressures for reform, if only for the self-righting of the system. Just as a political system based on the separation of powers produces repeated attempts to redraw the relationship between executive and legislature, so too does the Leninist system produce its own type of fluctuations. Since the 1920s there have been repeated reform campaigns within Leninist regimes prompted by the constitutional arrangements themselves.

Following the Bolshevik assumption of power in 1917, a variety of competing, overlapping and often ill-defined

institutions (commissariats, soviets, commissions, unions) sprang up, vying with each other for authority and power. These were the institutions that were to form the new workers' state. To their members' dismay and puzzlement, they quickly became overblown, bureaucratic and inefficient. If this was the new state, what role remained for the Bolshevik party? Different answers were offered. Some Bolsheviks argued that the only function left for the Party was one of education and enlightenment. Others argued that as the proletarian organization in a still petit-bourgeois environment which was responsible for the deformations, the Party should take over both the soviets and government institutions, infuse them with a class perspective, and run them in a proletarian fashion that would do away with the bureaucratic mess and inefficiency. The debates were complex and engaged the Party for the next three years.

By 1921, the Leninist constitutional compromise had been reached. The Party — as the conscience and voice of the working class — was to lead society forward, but its authority was to be exercised circumspectly, in the form of guidance. It would exercise final control over the state machine by supervising appointments and checking policy implementation. (Essentially, the Party acquired elements of legislative, executive and judicial roles.) The soviets, composed of the people's elected representatives, were also to be the loci of legislative and executive authority. Such a schema provided for two sources of authority — Party and soviets — but the power was stacked on the side of the Party. Its leadership role in the building of socialism meant that the subsequent expansion of the role of the state and the constitutional arrangements pushed it into "managing" all the state functions. Not surprisingly, many have come to talk of the "party-state." In the 1940s, when the Yugoslav and Chinese

¹ Although my understanding of Leninist regimes differs from that of Ken Jowitt, his comparative approach is one that has strongly influenced my thinking (see, in particular, his "Inclusion and Mobilization in European Leninist Regimes," in *World Politics*, October 1975).



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parties came to power, they quite sensibly put the same individual in charge of local government and party, thus fusing the two.

This constitutional arrangement has a tension built into it. The Party has an obligation to lead, make decisions, appoint people, check on execution and correct deficiencies. But as it does this, it runs the risk of becoming merely the top layer of the state apparatus — reflecting the latter's characteristics, its sections defending the institutional interests of state sectors, prone to the corruption and conservatism within the system. Its checking role is exercised in an ever more desultory fashion, its educational role becomes one of supervising the health of society, and Party activities themselves become increasingly ritualized, with membership and meetings as key indicators of Party activity. All these phenomena were present under late Stalinism, appeared very rapidly in Eastern Europe and in China, and were there with a vengeance under Brezhnev.

But the Party cannot sink permanently into this role. The insistence within the ideology on its role as vanguard, combined with the need to compete with capitalism and thus drive society forward, means that it will from time to time throw up a leadership which will try to recapture the role reserved for it. Thus the Leninist constitutional arrangement has not only a built-in imbalance between two sources of authority, Party and soviet, it also pushes the Party to take over but insists that it should remain separate. The constitutional compromise creates the tendency for the party to sink into the state and then for reformers to try to extricate it.

This cycle leads to the "classic reform response." The leader (and he does not have to be a newcomer, as both Stalin and Mao launched this type of reform well into their terms in office) calls for strong leadership from the center, for a spring cleaning of the Party. The slogan "cadres decide everything" is invoked. Whereas in post-revolutionary days the leadership aimed to throw out alien class elements and replace them with "proletarians," subsequently the emphasis shifts to "morally and politically correct individuals." It is assumed that the failings of the Party's behavior can be remedied by removing corrupt individuals and replacing them with upright ones. A campaign style marks the reform drive, accompanied by an endeavor to capture the debating floor and drive the opposition into silence. The reformers attack the state bureaucracy, and even the Party itself, for becoming too entangled in state functions rather than concentrating on its leadership and watchdog role. The remaining element in the campaign is an appeal to the people to criticize the bureaucrats, to show their activism and support for a leadership that draws its strength from ties with the people.

The reform campaign characterizes one swing of the pendulum in a Leninist-party regime. Some leaders are "classical reformers" of this type: Khrushchev for example, or Mao at certain times. Boris El'tsin possesses many of the

typical features. The reform can take an extreme form — China under the Gang of Four, for example — or can be more muted. Such a campaign is much less marked in communist-party regimes whose leadership has to take its cues from Moscow, since reform of this type requires an active, wilful, autonomous leadership. In subordinate Leninist regimes the reform strategies themselves will be different.

Any reform-minded leader in a Leninist regime carries with him this reform strategy. It is the one the constitutional arrangements offer him, the one the system engenders. He may not adopt it with a vengeance, he may attempt to combine it with other strategies, but he will use it. Both Andropov and Gorbachev have drawn weapons from its arsenal, as has Deng Xiaoping.

This type of reform campaign does not threaten the Leninist system. It is rather a self-righting operation, aimed at returning the system to equilibrium (just as, within the United States, there are periodic attempts to restore what is argued to be the proper balance between presidential and congressional power). These reforms do not lessen the role of the state. They are quite compatible with the extension of state control over property or social life. But insofar as they include an attack upon the bureaucracy, they can in the short run form part of a larger reform package aimed at limiting the state's functions.

Reform in Leninist regimes, however, has not been limited to the classic package. Pressures independent of those produced by political arrangements have compelled a rethinking. From Yugoslavia came the necessity to find a theoretical and political alternative to the Stalinist model, and this was followed by the popular demands for change in Poland and Hungary in 1956. More generally, the deteriorating performance of the centrally-planned economy, particularly marked by the end of the seventies in China, Poland and the USSR, has forced a reappraisal of state control of the economy and the accompanying political "command" system. But to understand both the nature of the reform thinking that has emerged and its strengths and weaknesses requires placing it in a wider context.

Rethinking the Role of the State

The nineteenth century in Europe and in North America saw the emergence of constitutional government as a new type of government. Powerful groups within society succeeded in curbing the arbitrary executive power of government, while simultaneously foiling demands from the poorer sections of society for a share. The twentieth century has seen increasing pressure from the poor and dispossessed for a share, for democracy, pressure which has forced both those who held power in the liberal constitutional states and in the old autocracies to give some ground.

"Democracy" has been incorporated into the liberal constitutional framework, and it was intended to provide the basis for the new socialist state. Demands for democracy

were accompanied by the assumption that the state, now responsive to people's needs, would act to provide the goods and services, to ensure the prosperity and social justice that their predecessors had so manifestly failed to provide for the majority of their citizens. The welfare state, state management of the economy, and varying degrees of state ownership were introduced under both liberal democracy and state socialism. The Bolsheviks, along with other socialists, had no doubt that the state should act in this way. "State socialism" has provided the strongest exemplar of the twentieth century state, a state owning and controlling a vast array of social resources through a centralized, often repressive executive unchecked by either powerful countervailing groups or democratic institutions.

In the second half of the twentieth century the phenomenon of the enlarged state has spawned both intellectual and political protests. There are the New Right intellectuals of the West, championing private initiative, and governments trying to rid themselves of welfare burdens and of the responsibility for "managing capitalism," eager to make the state leaner and meaner. In countries with Leninist regimes where the role of the state has been much greater, the first subjects of debate were property relations and state control of the economy.

There is a strand in socialist thought — a strand that disappeared under Stalinism — that emphasizes syndicalism, self-administration, and workers' control. It was this strand that the Yugoslavs rediscovered in their search for a theoretically appropriate alternative to *state* ownership. But it was ownership, not political forms, that occupied the reformers because of their belief that ownership was the basic category. It did not seem particularly relevant to seek an answer to the overweening state in a re-examination of "democracy," and indeed the Yugoslav direction of the fifties concentrated on other things. But "democracy" is part of the socialist lexicon and people's sovereignty exists in the "soviet" side of the Leninist equation. Would-be reformers find themselves drawn to reconsider its content, particularly as they grow skeptical of the possibility of changing the economic role of the state without accompanying political reforms.

Today, in the communist world, old orthodoxy on ownership and economics has broken down. A plurality of ownership forms and a combination of planning and the market can characterize socialism. Our concern, though, is with the proposed system of political reforms, the emphasis on "democratization." Leaders may recast democracy in a new form, such as single-candidate elections, but they will not deny its value. Whatever the personal views of communist politicians, they cannot argue against it. When Leninist-party leaderships, for whatever reason, find themselves re-examining the relationship between state and society, which necessarily means talking of improving present practices

(since the notion of "improvement" is built into Soviet political discourse, it is impossible to defend the present as the best of all possible worlds), it is difficult for them to avoid talking of "greater democratization." They may be able to render the discussion almost empty but, if the Leninist system is failing to carry society forward materially and culturally, one built-in response is to attribute the failure to the weakness of its "democratic practices." That, in turn, may encourage looking at democratic practices elsewhere.

In the post World War II world, then, reform-minded communists have come to see their task as one of devising a political system that gives the state a smaller role as owner and manager of the economy and society, one that preserves the communist party as the party in power but that makes it more accountable to the people. The solution they have arrived at is the giving of greater control to the elected bodies, i.e. to make "democracy" do the job. By what means, though, is this to be achieved?

Before we look at the reform strategies themselves, a note of caution is needed. First, we are in a very different world from one in which powerful groups, excluded from power, claimed and won their share. Nor, with the exception of Solidarity in Poland and the recent student movement in China, are we talking of a challenge to the authorities by the poor or dispossessed. Instead we witness sections within the ruling elite, with support and ideas from intellectuals, attempting to curb that very institution of which they themselves are a part. The guardians are talking of the need for a legal system to which they, too, should be subject. Our knowledge of the emergence of constitutionalism, of democratic movements, of military coups and stable democratic societies will be of little use to us here. One Polish Party leader told an opposition leader, "You know, all the textbooks tell us how difficult it is to seize power. But no one has described how hard it is to relinquish power."² We, as analysts, could say the same. Our eyes have long been fixed on state-building; now we need to think about state-dismantling.

Should our point of departure be states of a much earlier age that crumbled, not because of internal pressures but from sclerosis, or authoritarian regimes in Latin America today, or neither? We clearly have some thinking to do. Perhaps, too, we should recognize that our intellectual baggage of Western political science and all those dreary years studying the Brezhnev period finds us ill-equipped. The Brezhnev years robbed the Soviet Union of a generation of innovative scholars. Has it not also left its sediment in Sovietology? Our colleagues, the social scientists and historians, particularly in the Soviet Union but also in other socialist countries recognize that too long have they been separated from their counterparts in the West. Given past isolation, and knowledge that "new thinking" has never been more necessary if society's problems are to be solved, their interest in

2 See Timothy Garton-Ash, "Springtime of Two Nations," *The Independent* (May 12, 1989), p. 25.

“Western science” is intense. It is not at all clear, though, that answers lie hidden in the magic of Western social science and, since we are well aware of that, we should neither encourage false hopes nor be surprised when a certain disillusionment sets in.

Contrasting Strategies of Political Reform

First we distinguish between those in subordinate and in autonomous Leninist regimes. Just as the reform impulses stemming from the constitutional arrangements themselves are affected by the political environment, so too would we expect the presence or absence of political autonomy to affect an overall reform strategy. Our first category therefore includes those regimes in which communist-party rule is dependent upon Moscow’s dominance of the region, in other words most of Eastern Europe. Here any attempt to make the Party more accountable to the legislative assemblies, a move which emphasizes “the people” as a locus of authority, inevitably raises the question of national sovereignty. It does not make a difference whether the impetus for reform comes from a reforming communist party leadership anxious to make the Party more accountable to society (as in Czechoslovakia in 1968) or from those primarily concerned to win a greater degree of national autonomy (as in the Baltic republics today). In either case, the impossibility of divorcing the notion of people’s sovereignty from national sovereignty (and vice-versa) means that the consequences for the Party will be the same: it will have to claim that it is the “voice of the nation.” Until now its authority has rested upon its claim, as the party of the working class, to be the political institution best able to further the interests of society, but if the Leninist arrangement of a system of dual authority is dissolved, or resolved in favor of people’s sovereignty, then the Party has to “win” its place as the government.

In those countries of Eastern Europe where both the organizations and memories of other parties still exist, or where there is an alternative party like Solidarity, a dominant party or a multi-party system can emerge. In the Baltic republics this is not necessarily so, but the Party has only one choice: to put on the mantle of the “national party” or lose its authority altogether. In both cases the Leninist compromise is undone: there is one locus of authority — the people. The Party, if it is to rule, must show it represents the people. It cannot fight on its old platform of “the working class” both because that is too narrow and because for so long now the Party has claimed that its constituency is society as a whole. The need and the propensity to advance as the party of national unity is underscored.

These regimes, though, are helped by the fact that they lack a tradition of “orthodox reform,” of politicians who believe that the answer lies in restoring the Leninist party-state relationship. They have tended to muddle through,

sometimes with disastrous consequences for themselves, as in Poland, and sometimes by managing to effect compromises between the factions within their ranks, as in Hungary. Thus one very important obstacle to their dissolving the old party-state relationship is missing, or at least far weaker, than in its Leninist home. This, then, is one variant of reform: the Party puts itself forward as the party of national unity, with experience and expertise unmatched by any other party or organization. It is one to which the communist parties in these countries will increasingly turn, one which all of them except the East Germans could use to their advantage. They need to work on it, though, and the sooner the better.

Yugoslav and Chinese Reform

As for autonomous regimes, those bent on reform have produced three different reform scenarios. First there is the Yugoslav version, the *consensus-bargaining* model. Here the emphasis is on the decentralization of economic and political power, on a plurality of property forms, and on the Party playing the role of final arbiter in a complex system of consensus bargaining between producing units.

The Yugoslavs have long accepted a pluralism of interests within society and their reforms have aimed at creating a variety of institutions to represent different social interests (in the workplace, residential or ethnic communities, etc.). A satisfactory solution to the problem of coordinating these interests and resolving the conflicts that arise has, however, eluded them. At the regional level the Party is still the final authority; at the central level the adoption of a system of rotating chairs and single veto power has resulted in little government policy and, consequently, ever more devolution of power to the republics.

The consequences are a very weak central authority and a great degree of local autonomy. But at the local level itself the bargaining results in an inefficient use of resources and, increasingly, the granting of concessions which produce rampant inflation and regional conflict. Thus the most attractive and innovative reform strategy has failed to provide a viable alternative. A need for “new thinking” has never been more apparent than in Yugoslavia today. Elements of this model have appeared elsewhere but, in general, later reformers have looked to Yugoslavia to learn from its mistakes.

In the early 1980s the Chinese were interested in the Yugoslav variant but theirs, the model of *enlightened authoritarianism*, has significant differences. There is a plurality of property forms (although with state ownership heavily dominant) and a move towards decentralization, but no self-management. There is an attempt to separate the role of the Party from that of state administration, but here the stress is on the creation of a technically qualified, professional civil service that is based on merit. A series of elected bodies, from the provincial assemblies (where multi-candidate elections have taken place) to the National Congress (made up of delegates from those assemblies), scrutinize and criticize

details in legislative proposals. There is some very limited scope for registering opposition. The opposition “democratic” parties are awarded representation in the National Assembly, and their members may well vote against proposals. The Party, though, remains the formulator of policy, the body with the responsibility of bringing the different interests in society together to provide unity and stability. It is the Party leadership that reserves for itself the right to lead the country. There is no question of subjecting Party authority to popular sovereignty; the claim is that the Party is the sole institution capable of providing China with leadership and stability. It will move the process of economic and political reform carefully forward, increasing the democratic elements in the political process when and as it sees fit.

Such a schema preserves the Leninist duality of Party and state but the roles cast for the different institutions have been somewhat altered. The Party rules not because it is the vanguard of the working class, but simply because it is an institution which, possessing Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thought, can best serve as China’s national leader and unifier. The people’s role is seen as one of supporting but also of criticizing “details” of Party policy, while administration is to be the preserve of professional, technically qualified administrators. Does this variant have a future? The recent demonstrations and crackdown suggest its vulnerability but also its strength.

The economic reforms have produced hopes, inflation and an increasingly visible wealthy stratum. These people are not simply private entrepreneurs, but also cadres and their children who can take advantage of the new business opportunities to make substantial amounts of money, both honestly and dishonestly. Meanwhile the leadership has grown older, increasingly worried about stability and unsure of the wisdom of extending economic reform. The National Congress, which met in March, was a lackluster occasion whose slogan, “encourage the confidence of the people and consolidate the forces of development” echoed the tone of caution and consolidation. Discontent and disillusionment spilled over into the streets. To the students it was clear: economic reform was now being clogged by an elderly, increasingly conservative and corrupt leadership; political reform (democracy and *glasnost*) would free the economic reform and end corruption. If the Soviet Union could embark on political reform, why not China, which had started on the reform path ten years earlier?

But there are other intellectuals who, while sharing the students’ discontent, advocate a different solution: a new “authoritarianism.” In their view China is too poor, too backward economically and culturally, for a democratic order. They look to the experience of “the little tigers” (Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore) where the combination of a free market and authoritarian government has, in their eyes,

been responsible for the leap out of backwardness. That is the path China should take, they say. It is more backward, more illiterate than the Soviet Union and will only be ready for elections a hundred years hence. A strong leadership, flanked by professional advisors, is necessary to encourage economic development, to curb and restrain social conflict, and to ensure stability.

It is difficult to see that this view is very different from that of the present leadership, except that the young authoritarians are anxious to see the market given full reign. Li Peng, when questioned by a journalist at the end of the Congress, referred to it as “merely an issue occupying some intellectuals” but it surely reflects the views of some within the elite as they look at China’s enormous problems of poverty and overpopulation. We can expect the re-emergence of “old conservatism” in the wake of the crackdown to be accompanied by an increasingly polarized opposition within the Party advocating economic reform, but disagreeing strongly over whether it should be linked to political reform or to a “new authoritarianism.”

The Soviet Variant

This brings us to the Soviet variant, best described as *accountable authoritarianism*. In terms of economic reform (still hardly begun) and of property relations, the ideas are the familiar ones. Soviet economists and politicians are well aware of the problems that may accompany reform, notably inflation, but so far have not come up with any major new ideas. But in the area of political reform, it is different.

Public discussion today is light years ahead of the mid-eighties. Not all the ideas are new. In a recent collection of articles by reform-minded intellectuals, *Inogo ne dano*, Butenko’s analysis of the Stalinist system (“state-administered, state-bureaucratic repressive socialism”) and his advocacy of the creation of “true socialism” echoes classic Titoist critiques of thirty years ago. From Ambartsumov, however, comes a combination of familiar and new ideas. He quotes from a Chinese author on the similarity of social relationships under feudalism and socialism and Soviet authors will surely look increasingly at this theme — popular among Chinese academics since the early 1980s — of cultural backwardness as the cause of past misfortunes and present attitudes. In his discussion of the need to work out “for the first time in history, a normal, really adequate political system for socialism,” Ambartsumov moves onto new ground. The task, he suggests, is one of limiting the power of the state, “the monopoly of the center,” so that civil society can flourish and provide for dynamism and stability. Today, he agrees, the main advocates of pulling back the state may be Reagan and Thatcher, but among its earlier advocates we can include the “left-democrat” Emerson, whose opponents were Bismarck and Metternich. And Marx

The Harriman Institute Forum

was in favor of society swallowing up the state. Politically, Ambartsumov argues, what is required is an institutionalization of the conflicts that exist in society, and the use of the *principles* of bourgeois democracy.³

Although in slightly more measured tone, similar ideas appear on the pages of *Sovetskoe gosudarstvo i pravo* (*Soviet State and Law*) and the official Party journal, *Kommunist*. An editorial in the former refers to the “system of state socialism or, to put it more critically, of bureaucratic socialism” in which the need exists to redraw the relationship between the state and citizen, to divest it of its present paternalistic character in which the state advances “as an owner or guardian and the citizen as a ward or, much worse, as a petitioner,” an idea familiar from the writings of Polish and Hungarian sociologists.⁴ Who would expect to find, though, in the pages of *Kommunist*, a positive if slightly idiosyncratic analysis of Montesquieu’s separation of powers, accompanied by an argument for the adoption of its democratic aspects?⁵

Sanctioning Pluralism

This is not just academics letting off steam. A *Kommunist* interview with Vadim Medvedev, the Secretary in charge of the new Ideological Commission, is enough to give a veteran Sovietologist a profound feeling of disorientation. It is true that Medvedev will have no truck with those “subjective” ideas which imply that the source of the administrative-command system is to be found in Lenin’s ideas, or that “our socialist choice” (the October Revolution) was misguided, or that that which exists today is not socialism. And he states unequivocally that a multi-party system would be an irrelevance in the Soviet Union. But imagine what Khrushchev would have thought of statements such as:

However unfamiliar to our “socialist ear” the concept of pluralism sounds, we must realize, absolutely, that without recognizing and including in politics the real social differences of people, their interests and views, we can hardly speak with any seriousness of democracy.

Medvedev also advocates a search for a political system that will have enough flexibility to provide for “a balance of interests.” To find one, he suggests, we need to operate with a contemporary concept of socialism (which includes a variety of property relations) and to look not only to Lenin and to the experience of other socialist countries, but also to world history and the achievements of social democracy. World culture is the reference point: “The market, if one subtracts from it its speculative distortions, is one of the main achievements in the development of human civilization.”

As for politics, Medvedev argues, “Our scientists have expended much energy on demonstrating the class content and limitations of bourgeois democracy” but now we should recognize that certain democratic forms (elections, representative assemblies, civil liberties) have brought gains for the workers in class societies. It would therefore be

impermissible sectarianism and politically very limiting, to refuse to employ, critically and creatively, those democratic forms which are the result of social progress, in essence the achievement of human culture.⁶

The 19th Party Conference

The 19th Party Conference resolutions, though, take us back to half-familiar ground. The Conference itself and its television coverage brought political debate before the Soviet public in an unprecedented manner, but on paper at least, the Party is still the Party we know: “stepping forward as the initiator of reform and the active introducer of it into life, the Party is carrying out its mission as political vanguard of the working class, of all working people.” Some of the reforms advocated are old friends. The Party must refrain from taking over state functions, the apparatus must be slimmed down. It must “carry out cadre policy, ensuring the rational distribution of cadres” albeit “via the democratic mechanisms of the refashioned political system. All the changes are to take place within the Leninist rubric of Party and state which assigns to the Party the role of provider of political ideas and leadership. But the Party is to create opportunities for social organizations and initiatives to flourish; it is to be subordinate to law, and to allow mechanisms for coordinating interests.⁷ So far concrete proposals which would affect the inner-working of the Party are very few. The long Brezhnev period has made us forget just how prone the Soviet leadership since Lenin has been to reorganize the central apparatus, to urge its reduction and the need for more inner-Party democracy — but not to call for a lessening of its control over the *nomenklatura* system. There is not a whisper of that here, either. The election of party secretaries is new but, as Gorbachev himself recently noted, has meant very little in practice.

It was in relation to the soviets that the Conference produced concrete proposals for change: for the Congress of People’s Deputies, for the election of a President by the Congress, and for the election of the local party secretary as chairman of the local soviet. The proposals initially caused consternation: what purpose would they serve? And the way in which they were subsequently transformed into constitutional amendments — a rushed job by a commission which

3 Butenko, “O revoliutsionnoi perestroike gosudarstvenno-administrativnogo sotsializma,” and Ambartsumov, “O putiakh sovershenstvovaniia politicheskoi sistemy sotsializma,” *Inogo ne dano* (Moscow: Progress, 1988), p. 553, pp. 81-91.

4 *Sovetskoe gosudarstvo i pravo*, 1988, no. 9, p. 5; F. Feher, in T. H. Rigby and F. Feher (eds.), *Political Legitimation in Communist States* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1982), pp. 74-75.

5 V. Lazarev, “‘Razdelenie vlast’ i opyt sovetskogo gosudarstva,” in *Kommunist*, 1988, no. 16.

6 Vadim Medvedev, “K poznaniu sotsializma,” *Kommunist*, 1988, no. 17, pp. 3-18.

7 *Materialy XIX Vsesoiuznoi konferentsii Kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo Soiuza* (Moscow: Polizdat, 1988), Resolutions, pp. 106-148 passim, and in particular pp. 117-128.

was then pushed through the Supreme Soviet — indicated that a traditional style of Soviet policy-making was still alive and well.

Still, the amended constitution embodies a new perception of legislative/executive relationships. The smaller Supreme Soviet, elected by the Congress of Deputies, and sitting for most of the year, is to take on the task of scrutinizing legislation in a serious manner. The President, elected by the Congress, will bring his candidates for the posts of Chairmanship of the Council of Ministers, the People's Control Committee, the Supreme Court, the Procurator General, and State Arbiter to the Supreme Soviet for ratification and to the Congress. Ministers can no longer be deputies. Furthermore, the Congress is to elect a Committee of Constitutional Supervision of twenty-three specialists in the fields of politics and law — with representatives from each republic — who are to hold office for ten years and be independent of any government institution.

Apparent in these new institutions is the intention to separate the legislature from the executive, to make the former more active and the latter more accountable to it, and to provide for a constitutional "court." This move to some kind of "separation of powers" has been accompanied by the new electoral laws, allowing multi-candidate elections for two-thirds of the seats to the Congress.

There are four major thrusts of the reform program as it has taken shape in the past two years. First, that the Party should pull back from interfering in state institutions and become a more democratic, lively and vigorous political organization and leader. Second, that a more democratically-elected legislature should play a greater role in the discussion of policy-making, the executive being separate and accountable. Third, that law should have a greater role in defining relationships (an intriguing proposal that raises the question whether a legal state could ever come into existence as a result of intention rather than from a battle between countervailing forces). Fourth, that the whole panoply of the Party-state administration should shrink to allow more scope for social or private associations and for a pluralism of ideas.

Whereas under Khrushchev the Soviet Union was one of the pace-makers of reform in the communist world, the past twenty-five years have seen it lag behind. Other countries, especially Czechoslovakia, China and Hungary, made moves towards greater accountability. As far as elections are concerned, Hungary and Poland are out in front. But the present Soviet experiment stresses far more strongly than any others the importance of separating executive and legislature and the need for a legal state. Simultaneously, though, all the elements in the classic reform package are present: the emphasis on the need for strong leadership, for a rejuvenated set of Party cadres committed to *perestroika*, the attack on bureaucrats, and the call for the party to regain its leading role. There is the campaign style, the attempt to establish a "correct" position in, for example, the reply to the Andreeva

letter, or Gorbachev's claims that "we are all for *perestroika*."

Old Reform and New

The question is whether new-style reform is compatible with old. The acceptance of the validity of different social interests and their right to express themselves, and the assertion that no one can claim to have the correct answer to society's problems, poses a question mark against the Party's claim that its legitimacy is based on its superior knowledge of society and history. The insistence that what is needed is a legal state, to which even the Party should be subordinate, undercuts its traditional claim to be above the law. Finally, the new constitutional rules on making the executive accountable to a more popularly elected legislature both draw a new distinction between executive and legislative functions and shift the basis for the Party's legitimacy to the people.

This is the same shift as occurred in Eastern Europe and has the same ideological consequences regardless of today's practice. The General Secretary, on being voted in as President, acquired the mantle of "the national leader." The Party, in winning the majority of seats in the Congress of Deputies, became "the people's choice." Gorbachev's response to the election results was, "The people have spoken."

A vision of elections as a mechanism which provides citizens with the opportunity to register their discontent with particular officials, to throw out unpopular individuals and to bring particular "issues" to the fore (i.e. to institutionalize grass-roots criticism of "the bureaucrats") is compatible with a traditional view of reform. But the question is whether in practice an "open" election system can be kept to this, and whether its conservative opponents are prepared to allow even this much. The present arrangements must seem quite unacceptable to many within the Party and state hierarchy. The electoral arrangements are grossly unfair to those Party-sponsored candidates who have to contest their seats. It is not difficult to imagine the anger that must have flowed into the Party headquarters from those thus "discriminated" against. As the local level prepares for the autumn elections, there will be a number of anxious people and, higher up, strong demands that things be organized differently next time.

Much will depend on how the new institutions function. They could bring disillusionment to the new political activists and confirm the skeptics, or they could encourage the emergence of clearer platforms by contending groups. The recent Congress of Deputies has raised public discussion to new heights but the question of political practice remains to be resolved. One scenario would be the clawing back by the Party of its old control functions (a Chinese variant). Another would be the recognition by the Party that it should capitalize on its enormous organizational and ideological "lead," and retain power by offering the electorate a change of Party

The Harriman Institute Forum

leadership every five or ten years. Indeed that would seem the most positive alternative. If it merely stays with the present it risks a mauling at the polls by a population registering its discontent but unable to provide a coherent alternative.

There is no threat from opposition parties, because there are none — as yet. The nearest to other parties are the popular movements in the Baltic republics, which should give the authorities pause for thought. The most obvious organized political platforms in the immediate future are going to be “nationality” ones and this is the last thing the CPSU, wishing to wave the banner of the “people’s choice,” wants to confront. If it is to manage a one-party system in which there is some element of electoral accountability, as in Mexico, it is going to have to look to its own internal structuring and to recognize that the old-type reform strategy aimed at producing a united party is out. In its place there will have to be an acceptance of “platformism.” One platform within the Party, with its presidential candidate, could “win” a five-year term of office and hand out the *nomenklatura* spoils.

It is not surprising to find the two incompatible reform strategies in today’s USSR. In fact, it would be odd not to find classic Party reactions jostling with ideas that intellectuals have taken from the arsenal of Western ideas. Gorbachev himself expresses both. He is not an old-style reformer as Khrushchev was, but he still has a great deal of the old style to him. That is why he is such an interesting figure. He is a transitional figure who at times expresses, acts, *is* the traditional communist party leader. At others, he is clearly groping for something new and is willing to countenance new ideas and try them out in practice.

Is the “new thinking” on political reform coherent? It is concerned with reducing the scope of state control, limiting

arbitrary executive power, and to increasing democratic participation. But is there any evidence that attempts to achieve each of these will be aided rather than hindered by being combined with either of the others? Is greater democratization the way to curb executive power or is it, perhaps, positively unhelpful? Perhaps what is needed is powerful vested interests able to “check” the Party apparatus, not elected representatives.

Or take the question of economic reform. It has become an article of faith in the communist world that economic and political reform must accompany each other. There is a tendency to blame the failings of economic reform on inadequate political reform (as in China and Hungary) and to move from claiming that political reform is necessary to claiming that it will solve society’s ills, instead of recognizing that it will replace one set of problems with another. It is relatively easy to see the constraining effects of the traditional political system upon economic reforms, but it is far from clear that greater accountability and socialist pluralism will lead to a more efficient use of resources, more food in the shops and a more stable currency.

A dilemma presents itself. Given that the economic reform programs on offer will in the short-run mean unemployment, increasing income differentiation, and the cutting of welfare services, why would an electorate vote for them?

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