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Gorbachev and *Perestroika*

Will Mikhail Gorbachev survive by changing the system, or will he be forced to capitulate to the system? So asked Seweryn Bialer, veteran observer of Soviet politics and Ruggles Professor of Political Science at Columbia University, in a special interdisciplinary seminar with faculty and students of the Harriman Institute November 9, 1988. Professor Bialer discussed the unfolding, ever-changing strategy of *perestroika*.

The fate of Gorbachev and his program is directly connected with his ability to maintain a viable coalition in the face of mounting political and social opposition. "I think that the key fact to bear in mind about Gorbachev's political coalition is that it is a centrist coalition," noted Bialer. While there is not a major institution (such as the bureaucracy or the Party) that is solely identified as Gorbachev's power base, the coalition is an amalgamation of centrist factions and sub-groups from a number of power structures. As an example of this coalition, Bialer pointed out that in the army, the leading generals "are very much in support of *perestroika*, Gorbachev's foreign policy, and are in the forefront of the movement for reconciliation with the United States."

"I believe that the first wave of *glasnost*' is over," Bialer remarked. The initial outpouring of what had been pent-up and accumulated over many years has now subsided. Having spent this initial energy, the creative intelligentsia is now having trouble defining what they want. But the unchecked continuation of *glasnost*' carries potent political risks. Bialer warned that *glasnost*' will have to be restrained if Gorbachev's centrist coalition is to remain together. Many of the coalition members are embarrassed to be associated with some of the more radical publications. Contrary to what many think, the social base of the *perestroika* coalition is not the creative intelligentsia, but the new Soviet middle class, professional management, and skilled workers who are not committed to unrestricted freedom of speech.

The Anti-*Perestroika* Forces

As to the anti-*perestroika* forces, Bialer believes that a distinction should be made between resistance and

opposition. The resistance is comprised of the general administrative apparatus concerned with retaining its privileges. The individuals within the resistance are not fighting *perestroika* because they find something conceptually wrong with it. Rather, they wish to work as they always have, and they are not willing to unlearn old habits and adapt to a new system which doesn't carry immediate rewards. "One must remember that the resistance is subterranean, it does not manifest itself openly, it does not offer any alternative ideology and it has no social base. Therefore, it does not constitute a real danger of a political nature."

The opposition, on the other hand, operates openly. It can proclaim its views in newspapers that are partially under its control, and it has access to major institutions. Bialer pointed out that the opposition has a clear ideology. "They stand for some type of managerial-economic reform that will not be associated with *glasnost*' and historical revisionism." The opposition stretches across numerous social and political strata. Bialer sees the Soviet working class as potentially the most responsive group to appeals from the opposition. The historical revisionism that Gorbachev needs for his *perestroika* — to show that what existed in the past was in desperate need of reconstruction — is generally looked upon with disapproval by a majority of the workers. "The working and lower-class elements, especially among the older generation, do not want to hear that their whole life was spent serving a regime that was either criminal or stagnant." Another portion of the opposition is from the party apparatus and the "non-tenured" Party workers (for example, the hundreds of thousands of teachers of Marxism-Leninism) from whom Gorbachev wants to take power. These two groups form the social base of the anti-*perestroika* coalition.

Gorbachev's Offensive

In April of this year, according to Bialer, Gorbachev and his associates began an offensive against this opposition. The final act of this campaign was the "small equivalent of a coup d'état." At the hastily called September 30 meeting of the Central Committee meeting, five



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Politburo members who formed the nucleus of the opposition to Gorbachev were either removed or stripped of responsibilities. The most noteworthy of these personnel shifts was the demotion of Yegor Ligachev, who was removed as Party Secretary for ideology and placed in charge of agriculture.

Bialer identified a few key areas which were directly affected by this emergency meeting. First, "it is clear that for all practical purposes the institution of the Central Committee Secretariat has been abolished." This is a cut in the central party apparatus — an example to republic, regional and district party organizations of staff reductions that should be made everywhere. A second development concerns the reshuffling of personnel in the KGB. Viktor Chebrikov, who was removed from his post as KGB chief and put at the head of a legal commission, "was an important member of the opposition." Bialer sees this job change as analogous to removing the CIA director and putting him in charge of security studies at a university. The new KGB director, Vladimir Kriuchkov, had been the fourth ranking member of the organization prior to the shake-up, and had never had a leadership position in the domestic KGB. "It is clear that this has been done to purge the domestic KGB and that in the new legal structure, the intelligence apparatus, which provided the prestige and clout of the KGB, will be separated from the internal police."

"Gorbachev recognizes that without political changes, the economic goals of *perestroika* cannot be achieved," said Bialer. He wants to develop grass-roots democratization in the Party and local soviets that can act as a check or a balance to bureaucratic inertia. Moreover, Gorbachev aims to pull the party apparatus out of economic affairs so that it can concentrate on political questions of ideology and mass

organization. Other components of the strategy include enhancing the authority of an authentic legal system and turning the soviets at all levels into real legislatures.

A Strategic Shift

In the realm of economics, Gorbachev's strategy has changed from stressing high technology and modernization to an emphasis on living standards. Soviet economic policies, both domestic and international, are geared towards an increase in the marketing of agricultural products and receiving investment credits from the West for machinery to produce industrial consumer goods. "In the economic field, the success of *perestroika* is now defined as producing a better life for the Soviet people." This political-economic strategy is designed to preempt the frustration and discontent that is developing within the population, especially among the workers. "The real danger that Gorbachev and his coalition face is not from the opposition directly, but from mass phenomena that may act as a catalyst for opposition attacks on *perestroika*." Such mass phenomena would include strikes and food riots.

Bialer added that if there is no tangible increase in living standards by the end of next year, "there will be unrest among the Russian workers." Thus, the question of economic improvement is becoming a most important measure of success for *perestroika*. There is still debate, in both the Soviet Union and the West, as to whether the measures now being taken will prevent the sort of unrest that could jeopardize reform in the Soviet Union.

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