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The Mass Response to Perestroika

Peter Hauslohner, Assistant Professor of Political Science at Yale University and Senior Fellow this fall at the Harriman Institute, spoke to students and faculty October 6. He discussed which Soviet citizens will benefit and which will lose because of *perestroika*, or restructuring, in Soviet society. Three important questions provided the basis of his discussion: "What is the Soviet public's response to *perestroika*? How is it likely to change? And what difference does this reaction make?" Hauslohner noted that it is difficult to obtain any sort of data on the Soviet citizenry, and said that his views are still tentative, though reinforced by a week of research in Moscow in September.

Winners and Losers

The conventional wisdom among Western analysts is that "because of the clear danger of price hikes, unemployment, and growing inequality," most Soviet citizens are likely to resist *perestroika*, but that this is not nearly as important to the fate of reform as bureaucratic resistance. "I take issue with both these points," Hauslohner said.

In the first place, the Soviet public is highly differentiated in its circumstances, its tastes, and its attitudes toward political and economic reform. There is a large constituency for the preexisting "social contract" of the economic system which General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev is trying to transform. That system also had its losers. "Perestroika ought to be seen, at least in part, as an effort to make winners out of the old system's losers." Who are the new winners? Much of the intelligentsia (especially the young, whom Martin Walker of *The Guardian* calls the "Yummies," or

Young Urban Marxists), white-collar workers, most of the service sector, "perhaps even the petites bourgeoisie of the second economy." The new losers are much of the traditional working class. "This strategy makes sense," Hauslohner claims, because the groups likely to gain are those expanding in numbers and in importance to the economy.

However, "'mobilizing' this latent support for reform, while 'demobilizing' the opposition (to use sociologist Tatiana Zaslavskaya's terms), will be difficult." It constitutes a more complicated problem for Gorbachev than dealing with recalcitrant officials. Bureaucratic resistance is serious, but the leadership has numerous, powerful instruments at its disposal to handle it. By comparison, the leadership "has few non-coercive instruments to deploy vis-a-vis the mass public, while the transition period, from the old system to new, is likely to be one of increasing popular militancy."

Provocation of the Masses

Prices are going to rise, layoffs will probably increase, and there is going to be much pressure to raise productivity. Yet "the old argument that sacrifices now result in benefits later just doesn't wash with the majority of the population," a number of recent polls suggest. There is accumulating evidence of unrest associated with *gospriyemka* (the new quality control system) and expanded night shifts. Soviet leaders have publicly declared themselves "worried" about slow improvements in goods, especially food.

"Ultimately, the benefits are not going to be sufficient to anchor a new political regime," Hauslohner argued. "Basic norms are going to have to be adjusted as well." Whereas there have been vastly expanding debates on topics such as the new enterprise law, there has been little realistic discussion of the likely growth in joblessness and price reform. But if restructuring is to succeed, the public will have to become fully engaged in the process. "New norms, for example accepting a much greater degree of job instability than before, are going to have to be engineered."

Hauslohner feels that provocation of the mass public has been increasing. While this is truly an exciting time to be in Moscow, where there is enormous intellectual ferment, there has been little change in the lives of ordinary citizens. "A huge

gulf is opening between the quality of life of the intellectuals and that of most working people."

More Novocherkassks?

Provocation alone is not sufficient to produce open militancy, Hauslohner noted. Opportunities for protest must increase and the state's ability to deflect these actions must decline. Both are now happening, which gives the present moment in Soviet history its special character -- and which makes managing reform so difficult.

Hauslohner emphasized two developments. One is the weakening of the trade unions, which have traditionally been strong supporters of the old social contract; "over the next five years, the unions, as weak as they were in the past, are going to be even less effective." The second is a labor exchange system that is underfunded, understaffed and under-mechanized. Many Soviet economists do not fully comprehend the scope and complexity of the coming job dislocation.

"The provocations are growing while the instruments of the state are weakening," Hauslohner said, "suggesting the possibility of a significant rise in public militancy. It may even, to put the case as bluntly as possible, lead to new 'Novocherkassks,' the site of a bloody riot in 1962 which followed price hikes and arbitrary increases in output norms." He cautioned that he meant the possibility of incidents of similar scope, not of similar levels of violence, and that this emerging "window of vulnerability" will be temporary. "Nor can I imagine," he concluded, "at least in the next five to ten years, the growth of protest sufficient to threaten the survival of the state itself, meaning that the spread of popular militancy need not derail reform. In practice, of course, politicians might react in a less sanguine fashion."

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