Seventy years after the first, Gorbachev’s revolution seems to have reached a new, critical stage. Has it become irreversible?

The recent far-reaching Law on State Enterprises, designed to replace old Stalinist forms of economic organisation, represents an important milestone on the Soviet Union’s road to radical renewal.

Since the April 1985 Central Committee plenum, on Gorbachev’s initiative, the USSR has resumed the process of reform which began from 1953 very unevenly and inconsistently under Khrushchev, but which came to an end in the Brezhnev era.

In the Brezhnev period and, above all, from the mid-seventies, stagnation grew along with the “immobilism” associated with an increasingly gerontocratic leadership. This resulted in a decline in economic growth rates, particularly in labour productivity, especially serious in the modern branches of industry demanding the application of high technology. While official propaganda proclaimed an unbroken tale of successes, apathy, alcoholism, corruption and crime grew — though their statistics, like those of the falling grain production and rising infant mortality, were suppressed. As one of the editors of Moscow News told me recently: “The population were told that victorious socialism was bringing rising grain production and falling crime rates. In fact, the statistical curves were in the opposite direction!”

Andropov, who succeeded Brezhnev as general secretary after the latter’s death in 1982, attempted to mount a campaign against “accumulated inertia” and corruption in high places. His more dynamic, if largely technocratic, approach began to produce some positive changes, reflected in a limited improvement in economic growth rates. Unfortunately, during half of his 15 months’ tenure of office, he was on his deathbed, ending his days in 1984 at the age of 69.

His replacement by the 73-year-old, sick, and utterly undistinguished apparatchik Chernenko reflected the distaste felt by the majority of the Politbureau (on whose recommendation the Central Committee elected him) for the shake-up Andropov had begun. They clearly feared that Gorbachev, his obvious successor among the younger members of the party leadership, might take things even further though few, if any, guessed how far.

The pathetic television pictures of a dying and incapable Chernenko, following on those seen earlier of the moribund Brezhnev and and faltering Andropov, were deeply damaging to the standing of the Soviet leadership at home and abroad. It was no doubt the recognition of the need to recapture respect and dynamism that led to the failure of 70-year-old Viktor Grishin’s attempt to replace Chernenko on his death. In a situation now recognised to have been acquiring “pre-crisis forms”, 54-year-old Mikhail Gorbachev was elected as general secretary. Conscious, as he was to put it later, that “restructuring was necessitated by the mounting contradictions in the development of society”, he began at the April 1985 Central Committee meeting energetically to put forward proposals for accelerating economic growth. He started where Andropov had left off with efforts to ensure the implementation of the economic “experiment” already adopted in 1984, involving greater autonomy and incentives for the directors of some enterprises. Along with this, he undertook harsh measures against alcoholism and corruption, and proceeded to initiate an increasing number of personnel changes, along with important foreign policy initiatives. At this stage, the measures taken remained generally within a technocratic framework.

The first serious changes in that respect were to show themselves in the period leading up to the 27th Party Congress called for February/March 1986, exactly thirty years after the 20th Congress at which Khrushchev had exposed Stalin’s rule of terror. The pre-congress discussion, reflected in the press, was much more critical and hard-hitting than had previously been the case. The high point of this was the publication by Pravda in February 1986 of extracts from letters which, under the title “Cleansing”, attacked special shops and other privileges enjoyed by party and state leaders. Although recognising that Pravda was criticised (by Party Secretary Ligachov) at the congress for having
gone too far with some of the letters, the paper’s editor, Viktor Afanasyev, writes in a recent booklet: “On the whole ‘Cleansing’ achieved its objective: to promote the mobilisation of public opinion in the struggle against phenomena alien to the essence and spirit of socialism. The issue of Pravda in which it appeared was literally scrambled for, and passed from hand to hand. It was reproduced, read and discussed. The paper received about two thousand letters in response to it, some of which it published. The taboos of decades were beginning to break down.

At the congress itself, Gorbachev made a hard-hitting and self-critical report. He referred to the harm done by the “escalation of bureaucracy” and emphasised the need for “radical reform” of the economy at what he called an “abrupt turning point” in its life. While speaking of the need for “a further development of all aspects and manifestations of socialist democracy” (as indeed had Brezhnev’s congress reports), his remarks on the theme tended to remain fairly general. He did, however, speak of the need for
“corrections” in Soviet electoral procedures, as well as tentatively making suggestions for councils of work collectives and for women’s councils. For the first time since the early ‘sixties, a woman, Biryukova, was elected to one of the top party posts, becoming a Central Committee secretary, though not a member of the Politbureau. A Central Committee was elected in which 40.7 percent of the full members and 68.6 percent of the candidate members were new.

At the end of the congress it still seemed an open question whether the reform course which it had approved would remain predominantly technocratic — which, in itself, would represent an advance on the bureaucratic/gerontocratic inertia of the Brezhnev era — or whether it would acquire a really democratic character.

Last summer and autumn saw the beginning of a turn to democratisation which has, since then, acquired increasing momentum. On his journeys throughout the USSR, Gorbachev began, more and more, to emphasise political democratisation as a condition for economic success, making specific proposals for drawing the working people into the decision-making process, encouraging them to criticise bureaucratic leaders, and promoting great openness (glasnost) in the press. If the first steps in the restructuring (perestroika) process had to come from the top, Gorbachev now made it increasingly clear that its successful continuation would be impossible without popular involvement from below. He clearly understood that the traditional appeals to work harder had become devalued. So long as the democratic provisions of the constitution remained a formality and people felt powerless to influence the decisions of party leaders and industrial ministries, the change in mentality that perestroika required would never come about.

Moreover, people would need to see a radical improvement in what is referred to as the social sphere — amenities which, he emphasised, were grossly neglected by industrial ministries and factory directors — concerned only with their production targets. Such technocratic tendencies came increasingly under attack both for their neglect of the needs of working people and for their damage to the environment. Gorbachev made his position most explicit at the Soviet trade union congress in February when he said that “the new role of the trade unions in conditions of perestroika lies above all in their becoming a counter-balance to technocratic tendencies in the economy which, it has to be said, have become rather widespread recently, and in enhancing the social significance of the economic decisions taken”.

At the Central Committee plenum in January, Gorbachev went much further than he had done at the party congress in a number of important respects. Firstly, in his criticism of the past and his recognition that “the problems that have accumulated in society are more deep-seated than we first thought”.

Secondly, in his emphasis on democratisation as “the party’s urgent task” in bringing about the “drastic changes” needed to overcome these problems. Thirdly, in the specific proposals that he put forward to promote this democratisation. The most important of these was his proposal that the election of the secretaries of Communist Party committees below Central Committee level should take place by secret ballot with every member of a committee having the right to enter any number of candidates. This would stimulate much more initiative and active involvement from below and help to promote younger, reform-minded men and women, and overcome entrenched bureaucratic resistance to change. Its implications, however, are wider. Its implementation would make significant inroads into the long-standing nomenklatura system, under which candidates for responsible posts in the party, the state and public organisations have to be recommended and approved by party committees at different levels. This proposal of Gorbachev’s was, however, not incorporated in the resolution adopted by the plenum, which spoke only in general terms about “further democratising” procedures for such elections. This is only one of the indications that Gorbachev wants to push ahead faster than the majority of the Central Committee is prepared to go.

What arguments were used in the committee’s debate we do not know, as glasnost has not yet gone as far as to enable the press to carry reports of the thirty-four other speeches. Gorbachev did, however, secure agreement that a party conference should be held in June next year to discuss questions of further democratising the life of the party and of society as a whole. And since the January plenum, the press has been reporting a number of cases where party committees have elected new secretaries by the method proposed by Gorbachev.
long been recognised to be bureaucratic, unwieldy, wasteful and totally unsuited to the modern, sophisticated, consumer-oriented economy that the Soviet Union would like to become. The new law is designed to promote both greater economic efficiency and greater democracy which are seen as closely linked. Under it, autonomous and "completely self-financing" enterprises will manage the public means of production allocated to them within the guidelines of a central plan much less rigidly defined than has hitherto been the case. Self-management will be introduced into enterprises with the election, by secret or open ballot, of the factory director by the workforce for a period of five years, subject to endorsement by the appropriate ministry. Shop managers, forepersons and team leaders will similarly be elected by their workforces for up to five years. In addition, councils of work collectives will be elected for two to three years by a general meeting or conference of the enterprise.

A number of factories have, this year, already been given the opportunity of electing new directors. This appears to have been welcomed by their workers — though with some surprise, as shown by a letter to Pravda. "If anyone had told me a few months back that I would be taking part in an event like this," wrote a worker at an Omsk gearbox factory, "I'd never have believed him. Just imagine, we're electing our director ourselves ..."

Indeed, it is not so long ago that all talk of self-management was rejected as a Yugoslav or anarcho-syndicalist deviation, self-management being considered only appropriate to the higher stage of communism. It is now recognised that the Yugoslav self-management system, which pioneered the election of managers, was taken into consideration when drafting the new Soviet law. Soviet representatives stress, however, as did the Czechoslovak reforms of 1968, that they have been at pains to avoid going as far in decentralising the planning system as the Yugoslavs have done, with their consequent unemployment problem.

The law on the protection of citizens’ rights gives legal enactment after ten years to a provision of the Soviet constitution adopted in 1977 laying down that officials guilty of suppressing criticism should be liable to punishment. The Soviet press in the recent period have highlighted a number of cases of persecution of people who have exposed abuses. The new law lays down a ten-day limit by which complaints against officials violating a citizen’s rights must be examined by a court.

The third recently adopted law provides for the submission of major questions of state life to nationwide discussion. Introducing it, veteran Soviet President Andrei Gromyko said this was necessary because the country had experienced a period of “deformation of a number of aspects of socialist democracy”. Although there had previously been discussions on new legislation there had been serious inadequacies. Many of them were “overorganised and in many ways a formality”, and many of the proposals made in them had been ignored. The point now, he said, was actually to reflect opinions expressed in the decisions finally taken.

The development of Soviet democracy today is bound up with the moves being made, extremely unevenly, towards the development of a civil society genuinely independent of external state and party control. The spheres in which, to date, this has gone furthest are in the media, in the arts and among young people.

As in Czechoslovakia in 1968, the media are in the forefront of the democratisation process. Newspapers, with wide variations, have become more informative in their news reporting and more outspoken in their exposure of abuses. The press, including the party's official daily, Pravda, have been encouraged by Gorbachev and party secretary Yakovlev to exercise their own judgment without going to the party for instructions. "Publish what you consider best — we'll let you have our opinion afterwards", they told editors. So, apart from checking on matters that might involve military secrets, they exercise their own discretion (which still involves..."
certain self-imposed limitations, rituals, etc.), much to the confusion of some communists at home and abroad who had always looked to the Soviet press to give them a clear official line.

The new approach was reflected in the full accounts (after a lengthy initial delay) of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and the quick (though incomplete) reporting of the riots in Alma Ata in December after the replacement of Kazak party secretary Kunayev by a Russian. Previously taboo subjects such as drugs, prostitution and homosexuality are now discussed in the media, and AIDS is now receiving increasingly frequent treatment. The previously suppressed grain and infant mortality figures are now published, and crime statistics are expected soon. Moscow News, which appears in Russian and four foreign languages, aroused enormous interest when it reproduced in full, from the French rightwing daily, Figaro, a letter from ten prominent Russian emigres criticising the Soviet reforms as inadequate and saying that the proof of genuine glasnost would be if their piece were published in the USSR! Soviet television, which has become much more lively, now has phone-in programs enabling members of the public to put their queries and complaints to ministers and leading officials. Uncensored round-table discussions and interviews with foreign politicians (including Thatcher) have become increasingly common. The jamming of some, though not all, foreign radio stations has stopped.

Equally rapid and remarkable have been the changes in the cultural scene. Following a curtailment in the powers of Glavlit, the state bureau that used to exercise censorship over the publication of books, a number of novels dealing with previously suppressed themes, including (like Rybakov's Children of the Arbat) Stalin's mass repressions, are now appearing. Contentious films, which had been held up for years, have been released. They include Abuladze's Repentance, a chilling exposure of totalitarian repression evoking the stalinist past, which has been seen by millions of people, and Podniek's strikingly frank documentary on young people in Latvia, Is it easy to be young? Film censorship has been ended, according to the film makers' union new first secretary, the well-known director Elim Klimov.

At the writers' film makers' and journalists' congresses there were lively debates on both cultural, social and, indeed, political questions. (In the Soviet Union they are all inextricably linked.) The writers' congress played no small part in mobilising public opinion and leading the government to abandon its ecologically unsound plans for the diversion of Siberian rivers. The journalists' congress heard a plea from the well-known political columnist Alexander Bovin to put an end to all jamming of the airwaves. The film makers' congress saw free elections throwing out the old conservative leaders by new progressive ones.

There has been an increasing growth of what are called "informal organisations", to which Soviet sociologists have been devoting special attention. They have particularly bothered among young people who have been more and more getting together under their own steam to pursue a wide variety of leisure time interests, particularly in sporting, open air and cultural fields. Rock groups have experienced a striking upsurge and are now increasingly featured on late night TV. The Komsomol (the communist youth organisation), with its nominal membership of 41 million, had to recognise at its congress in April the need to end bureaucratiic forms of organisation which had alienated many young people from it. Above all, it has accepted that the "informal organisations" are there to stay and that the Komsomol should view them positively and respect their autonomy.

The idea of women's councils, first mooted by Gorbachev at the party congress, has now caught on. All over the country they have been set up. With wide local variations, they appear to be seeking to find their feet and work out the most appropriate role for themselves. Their representatives came together in January at a national women's conference, at which the Soviet Women's Committee was elected. There has till now, however, been no sign of any widespread critical debate on the position and role of women in Soviet society in which feminist arguments are featured and international experiences considered.

The largest "social organisations" — the trade unions — with their 140 million members are, unfortunately, still one of the most conservative. Gorbachev felt impelled to complain at the trade union congress in February about "some trade union officials dancing cheek to cheek with economic managers". And he insisted: "Union committees must consistently defend workers' interests." And he went on: "To be frank, poor working conditions at many enterprises, insufficient health care and inadequate rest rooms are something that trade union organisations have grown used to in many places. This still occurs very often." Since the congress, the press has carried reports of trade union actions in a number of places against high-handed and negligent managements. Such trade union initiatives would still, however, appear to be fairly limited.

Perhaps more than in any other country in the world present-day politics in the Soviet Union are intimately linked to the assessment of the past. Gorbachev has emphasised that there must be no "forgotten names or spaces" in the country's history. In July, he urged the representatives of the media "never to forgive or justify" the stalinist purges which reached their height in 1937-8 and "inflicted heavy losses on the cadres of the party, the intelligentsia and the military cadres". Khrushchev began to lift the curtain on this terrible period at the 20th (1956) and 22nd (1961) party congresses which condemned Stalin's "mass repressions", but after 1964 their scale and significance were increasingly downplayed. When Moscow News published a hard-hitting speech by the historian Professor Yuri Afanasiev criticising historical apologies and urging a more honest, balanced and critical
attitude to Soviet history, it received, along with letters of support, others testifying to the persistence of classical Stalinist attitudes. Thus, one letter from an assistant professor of history who had been a party member since 1947, demanded that the paper be "more circumspect in selecting and elucidating material on problems of party-history science". He complained that "attempts to draw us into discussions about the past can divert us from the tasks of reconstruction". Another letter alleged that Afanasyev was "too emotional and his class stance too blunted ... Peaceful discussion clubs in periods of historical cataclysms are a utopia".

A crucial historical question which has still to be tackled is the Moscow Trials of 1936-38, in which some of the most prominent revolutionary leaders were condemned (mainly to death) on charges of terrorism and collaborating with fascist powers against the Soviet state. The main accused, including Trotsky (in his absence), Bukharin, Zinoviev and Kamenev, have still not been cleared of these charges, although these have now been undermined by the rehabilitation of other defendants whose "confessions" were pivotal to some of the other sentences. It is to be hoped that, with the celebrations of the 70th anniversary of the October Revolution, and a new party history being prepared, justice will be done to the memory of these victims of Stalinist repression, their role in Soviet history objectively assessed and their writings made accessible to the Soviet public.

In June, local elections to the 50,000 local Soviets were held. In the great bulk of them the practice of only one candidate standing, which has been increasingly recognised to need changing, continued. However, the first timid steps were taken towards giving voters a choice. Already in April, a Supreme Soviet resolution had announced that a new "experimental" system would operate in 76 district, 47 city, 87 settlement and 859 rural Soviets. In these selected Soviets there were more candidates nominated than there were deputies to be elected. Those not elected were treated as "reserve" deputies. They will be invited to take part in meetings of the Soviet but without voting rights. I have seen no evidence of contests in which the electors were presented with policy alternatives. Yet the effective development of democracy must surely entail not only a big increase in multi-candidacies, but also the opportunity to make political choices. This need not imply the formation of competing political parties, which existed and were considered normal in the early years of Soviet power, but are clearly not on the cards in the USSR today. It does, however, require the opportunity for candidates to represent different views within the framework of the Soviet constitution on such questions as nuclear energy, particularly in an area where it is proposed to build a nuclear power station. This would favour the development of a socialist pluralism (an expression now used by Gorbachev) where the Communist Party would base its continuation as the leading force in society on conviction won in an open battle of ideas.

A reform of the Soviet legal system is now under consideration and is seen by Gorbachev as a crucial element in the process of democratisation. The Soviet press has revealed some horrific miscarriages of justice, including the extraction of confessions by "measures of physical pressure". A Supreme Court conference condemned the continuation by some judges, constitutionally "independent", of the Stalinist practice of phoning regional party officials for instructions before passing sentence.

The release of 140 imprisoned "dissidents", as well as the permission given to Academician Sakharov to return to Moscow from internal exile in Gorky, seemed to represent a welcome change in the official attitude to the expression of opposing views. It has, however,
unfortunately not been followed by the freeing of hundreds of others still in prison, corrective labour colonies, exile and psychiatric institutions. Most of them were sentenced under Articles 70 and 190/1 which make "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda" and "defaming the Soviet state and social system" criminal offences. These articles are now being reviewed, but official opinion seems to be divided between those who favour making their provisions milder and those who see the retention, in any form, of such catch-all laws, seventy years after the establishment of Soviet power, as incompatible with democratisation.

It is encouraging to see the publication this year of the first articles in the Soviet press arguing for the abolition of the death penalty. This is one of the issues, alongside the ecological ones already referred to, on which one might expect to see the development of lobbies and independent campaigning bodies as features of a developing civil society.

Another issue for concern is the continuation of special shops and other nomenklatura privileges despite the public criticism expressed in the pre-congress letters published in Pravda — which is quite a separate question from increased income differentials now being generally promoted to stimulate production. After Moscow carried through the shake-up in Kazakhstan following the Alma Ata riots, the press reported that luxury dachas built by party leaders there at state expense were confiscated to provide hospitals, children's homes and hotels with places for two thousand people. It was also revealed that hundreds of people employed at Alma Ata University were related by blood or marriage. The existence of such privilege and patronage, which nobody seriously believes are specifically Kazakh phenomena, is deeply resented by working people. Most of them, however, did not see what they could do to change it in Kazakhstan or feel able to act to end it where it still exists elsewhere. The problem of changing attitudes and restructuring the whole social dynamic to stimulate changes initiated from below is still far from being solved. Until it is, talk of narodovlastia (people's power) will remain pretty hollow.

In the country, perestroika's strongest backers are to be found among the creative intelligentsia (including journalists), the technical specialists and more skilled and younger sections of the working class. In the party apparatus, support comes above all from the ablest and more forward-looking sections of the younger and middle generations, whose initiative was thwarted and promotion blocked in the "period of stagnation".

Among young people generally there is particular appreciation of greater cultural freedom and an impatience to overcome more rapidly the bureaucratic paternalism that still confronts them. One source of discontent, particularly among students, is the virtual impossibility for most to visit the West, or even enter and travel around other European socialist countries with the comparative ease of their opposite numbers in the West. There are now hopes that this will change. Above all, Gorbachev's bold and flexible peace initiatives have won wide and enthusiastic support among the Soviet people, although it is no secret that military leaders have felt that some of his concessions to promote agreement with the West have gone to far. However, the recent replacement of the Soviet defence minister and other top military leaders show that the armed forces are clearly under political control.

While there may not exist an organised opposition to perestroika, there are certainly strong resistances which function as a "braking mechanism" on it. Soviet theoretician Anatoly Butenko has drawn attention to the background and dangers. "Many previous mistakes and the braking mechanism that has arisen," he says, "were directly linked to the phenomena of the 'thirties and 'forties which arose in the conditions of the cult of Stalin's personality ... I think that perestroika is proceeding so slowly at present because precisely those forces which did not fully implement the decisions of the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU (1956) do not want changes and are applying the brake to them. If we do not fully expose the essence and positions of these forces and do not fight them, perestroika will be derailed and the process of change may even go into reverse." (This is a fear that I have heard expressed by others during two recent visits to the Soviet Union.) Today, says Professor Butenko, "we see that the bureaucracy represents the main social force of the braking mechanism." 2

There are today 18 million people in the administrative apparatus. Tatyana Zaslavskaya, the extremely influential president of the Soviet Sociological Association, argues that they should be reduced to four or five million.3 Those who now see themselves described in the press as "superfluous managerial parasites" regard perestroika as a most unwelcome threat to their privileges and comfortable life style.

However, there is mistrust or, at best, uncertainty expressed in a wait-and-see attitude towards perestroika on the part of many workers who have muddled through working at a slack pace while a blind eye has been turned on their minor "fiddles" by managers often getting away with major ones. Perestroika entails ending these practices and boosting efficiency and labour productivity. This will bring better pay for the more skilled and motivated while others who contribute less to production and social welfare are liable to find themselves worse off — especially if (as is being considered) the substantial subsidies on basic foodstuffs are gradually reduced. Already, more stringent quality control has led to many losing bonuses with which many had, as a matter of course, supplemented their low basic wages. On the other hand, decisions have been taken to raise the incomes of teachers and doctors, a large majority of whom are women, to the levels of skilled workers over the next five years. An expansion of the much neglected service sector is being encouraged. It is envisaged that it should absorb millions to be
made redundant by industrial restructuring and the axing of a swollen bureaucracy. An acid test of perestroika for working people will be how far it appreciates raises their living standards, housing, welfare and quality of life. However, Gorbachev, much more realistic than Khrushchev in his time, has no illusions that this can be achieved quickly.

The big hope is that the rapid introduction of workplace self-management under the new law, along with the development of much more far-reaching democratization throughout society, will in the meantime call forth a positive response from millions of working people still distrustful or uncertain about perestroika. The experience of Czechoslovakia in 1968, even allowing for its background of a much more developed civil society, is relevant and encouraging in this respect. Within a few months — certainly much more quickly than we can expect in the Soviet Union — and without time to yield any significant material benefits, the bulk of the initially hesitant workers had been won as enthusiastic supporters of Dubcek's reform course through a rapid democratization program which included the election of Workers' Councils at workplaces.

A long, hard and complicated road lies ahead. There is a vast accumulation of problems to be overcome and there will undoubtedly be sharp political struggles. Anyone expecting quick triumphs has learnt nothing from history and is courting disappointment. But the striking developments initiated over the last two and a half years have already gone considerably further than any of us expected. They should give socialists everywhere cause for cautious optimism and a determination to make our contribution to achieving the disarmament so important both for the peace of the world and for the success of perestroika.

NOTES:

1. V.G. Afanasyev, Gazaia 'Pravda' 75 let (Moscow 1987), pp. 50-1.
2. Interview with Moskovskaya Pravda, 7.5.87.
3. Interview with Weg und Ziel (Vienna), July/August 1987.

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