

BREAKTHROUGH to FREEDOM ABOUT PERESTROIKA: TWENTY YEARS AFTER

Perestroika as Seen by a Moscow Humanitarian

My participation in the political life of the era of Perestroika was minimal. Moreover, I did not know personally at the time any of the more prominent political figures of that period. I met many of them, including Gorbachev, later. That is why my memories of Perestroika are the recollections of an ordinary and not very active participant in the events, a member of the Moscow humanitarian intelligentsia.

1. Pre-Perestroika Era

Marxism-Leninism died a quiet death that went unnoticed at some moment in Brezhnev's times. During Khrushchev's era and at the beginning of Brezhnev's era, I met very many Marxists who were bright and really committed. They all, naturally, were opposition-minded.

That was the time when showing interest in Marxism and being in opposition were practically one and the same thing. One and the same process repeated itself time and again, when someone from the great mass of people with formulas of official ideology drummed into their heads would go back to its "original sources" to get astonished at the discrepancies between what had been written by the "classics of Marxism" and the official orthodoxy and "real Socialism." If a person becomes convinced that he or she understands the truth contained in the sacral sources of ideology abandoned by the government and not understood by society, they would have a natural desire to open people's eyes to it. The official Marxism logically gave birth to its own "Protestantism." However, Marxism is also an ideology of historical optimism and action aimed at changing the world. That is why the realization of the existence of a conflict between the official doctrine and the contents of Marxist texts inevitably resulted not just in the desire to "open people's eyes", but also in the drive to change society, the drive towards "Perestroika."

I would like to recount two episodes from that remote time which are etched in my memory.

The first episode dates back to 1963 or 1964. There was a student at our history department at MGU (the Moscow State University), older than me and reputed to be a great expert in Marxism. The university authorities were afraid of him, since he was suspected of some underground activities. He suffered from some eye disease and was losing sight. He had a girlfriend, a nice girl who was an art critic and saw him as a romantic hero. Sometimes they would skip lectures together and hide in some corner and she would read aloud to him. Once I came up to them and heard her reading to him *The State and Revolution* by Lenin. Suddenly he interrupted her: "This place is very important; let's read it again." I can clearly see this picture before me even today.

The other episode dates back to 1969 or 1970. I was acquainted with a philosopher, who was a passionate Marxist and managed for some time to make a career (he became a teacher with the Academy of Social Sciences at the CPSU Central Committee) being at the same time secretly involved with a dissident movement (of course, he left it later). He gave samizdat (underground literature) books to me and to other people to read and disseminate them and we had to pay him for that with any money we could spare and take money from the readers and give it to him. These funds were subsequently used to help political prisoners. I remember him giving me a book by Solzhenitsyn, which I did not read (I was not much interested in it), still I paid the money. He did not really like me, for I was not a Marxist. I never argued with him, which, apparently, irritated him even more. Once we met each other by chance and his feelings burst out. All of a sudden, he started telling me with some anger that people like me were not capable of doing anything, since the 20th Century was the century of Marxism and all the great things in

it were accomplished by Marxists only. I remember countering to him then, "Hitler, for instance."

Of course, the peak of these "Perestroika" activist attitudes and the democratic ideological search within the Marxist and the Russian revolutionary tradition (represented by Nikolay Chernyshevsky and narodniks (Russian populists)) falls on 1968, and after the Prague Spring they started to subside. By the mid-1980s, there were practically no more people like I mentioned above. Some left for the West or Israel; some became ordinary Soviet scientific workers. I do not know what happened to the first of the two characters I told you about. As to the other, I met him in the post-Perestroika era; he was a moderately successful editor of a liberal journal and it seemed to me that he was mostly afraid of my asking him questions about his Marxism.

Since the early 1970s, when I worked at academic institutes and had a lot of acquaintances among the humanitarian intelligentsia, I have not practically met sincere and smart Marxists any more (at first, I wrote "have not met," then remembered a few "doubtful" cases and added the word "practically"). Among my acquaintances there were many dedicated Westernizers; there were also Zen Buddhists and Orthodox Christians, Russian nationalists of fascist trend, Zionists, and so on and so forth. (Of course, it would be impossible to describe convictions of most of them — they were just people living without any convictions.) However, there were no or almost no Marxists among them. I am aware of the fact that my circle of acquaintances was limited and, of course, there were Marxists around. However, the fact that I can hardly recall just a few doubtful examples from among some hundred and fifty of my acquaintances belonging to the humanitarian intelligentsia shows that by that time they had become very rare.

With virtual disappearance of unofficial reformative Marxism, the government got rid of the only ideology capable of inducing people to commit a purposeful "revolutionary" act. The ideological trends filling in the vacuum were incomparably farther from the official ideology that nobody believed any more; however, they were pregnant with smaller direct threat. A person having read too much of the State and Revolution, like the University friend of mine, was supposed to call for some rebuilding and make some plans to change the system. A person having read too much of Buddhist Sutras or Orthodox Christian philosophers was not capable of committing anything "socially dangerous". It was even easier for him to be a conformist repeating formulas that meant nothing to him. The situation was similar to that of the Renaissance and Reformation era when true Christian Protestants were violent enemies of the papacy and at same time there were many people at the Pope's court who did not believe in Christian God at all, but were quite loyal.

In the 1970s, there existed two main social world-views, both far from being of Marxist nature and not too dangerous for the government.

Firstly, it was Westernism. Unlike Marxism, with its ideology of action, and "Perestroika," this Westernism was just a belief that "everything with us was bad," while "with them everything was all right". Of course, westernizers in high positions in some way facilitated the process of liberalization; however, this world-view did in no way engender any projects of changing the reality. More often than not its adherents believed that everything with us was so bad that there was absolutely nothing we could do about it. The only radical step resulting from this belief was to leave the country for good. Many of my acquaintances moved to the West or Israel in the 1970s and 1980s. Many Russians pretended to be Jews or married Jewish girls (both fictitiously and not) just to leave this hopeless country.

Of course, the dissident movement was also active. However, it was active only through the efforts of isolated individuals unable to stand the atmosphere of dying totalitarianism any more, but still having no plans as to reforming society. In my opinion, what dissidents said and wrote was not very interesting. Samizdat, which actively spread at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, had "withered" by the 1980s, partially because of the fact that the dissidents started moving to the West one by one and partially due to the loss of interest in this phenomenon.

Secondly, there was Slavophilism. In the 1960s and even in the beginning of the 1970s, moving "back to the roots" of the official orthodoxy meant getting to Lenin's and then to Marx's works (early Marx was very popular), then to Hegel and Chernyshevsky and Russian populists (as another branch). In the 1970s — early 1980s, Lenin and Chernyshevsky were not read any more; however, everybody started reading Russian religious philosophers. Passion for these authors could sometimes be combined with Westernism; however, more often it would lead to "patriotism" of a fascist trend, portraying the Great October Socialist Revolution as a result of a conspiracy by Jews and masons. This ideology represented a negation of official dogmas, which was even more radical than Westernism; however, it was not dangerous for the government, either. The fact was that the "patriots" perceived the USSR as a new Russian empire, restored to life after the Jewish dominance of the 1920s, and saw liberal and dissident attempts to weaken the government as a continuation of Jewish intrigues. Among the people around me there were only few adherents of this trend.

Thus, dominating among the intelligentsia were the trends negating dogmas of official ideology but carrying no message of taking efforts towards a revolution or reform. I do not remember a single conversation from the entire era starting from the beginning of the 1970s until the moment Perestroika began, which would discuss plans to reform society, although many conversations were extremely frank and there were dissidents among my acquaintances, who later moved to the West and were rather active there. However, once resettled there, they would reveal no plans secretly nurtured while in this country, either, since they had none.

I am writing this to make clear the idea that Gorbachev's advent was untimely. Had the cards of history shown something different and had Perestroika with its initial ideology of Marxist and Leninist reform (a belated Soviet version of the Prague Spring) happened earlier, then Gorbachev with his "more socialism" concept would not have found himself in a vacuum. Evolutionary democratization could take place in the USSR only through a Marxist reform, through "getting back to Lenin," "back to Marx." However, such kind of reform required some minimum amount of people capable of embracing these ideas literally, rather than as a cover or an outward form. There were plenty of such in people in the 1960s; in the 1980s there were none.

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I must also say a few words about my own ideas of that time.

It is hard to give a frank recollection of the thoughts one had 20 years ago. Human memory works in such a way as to forget things that do not fit into the person's current perception of the past events and oneself and replace these forgotten things with things that fit in. Just like peoples create flattering versions of their own history, individuals create flattering versions of their own recollections and believe them. Today it is hard to find a person who would remember their admiration for Yeltsin; likewise, some time later it would be difficult to find a person remembering their admiration for Putin. However, I will try my best to be accurate in my recollections.

My views were a version of passive Westernism, which I mentioned above, with a few nuances explained by my profession (history of religion) and personal features. When a student, I was astonished by the similarity between the struggle waged by dogmatic parties at ecumenical councils of the church, that I studied just for myself, and the struggle seen at the Party congresses in Lenin's era that was the subject of our course in the history of the CPSU. I realized that Marxism-Leninism was a kind of religion. I thought that there had been many religions that flourished and then died. The dominating religion in the USSR of my time was Marxism-Leninism that was dying. Of course, it was not the "true faith." But there can be no true faith at all. I did not hate the Soviet government and Marxism, although I believed that my professional duty was to search for some real mechanisms of development of society and, hence, get into conflict with official dogmas, which was not too dangerous in itself, since I dealt with things that were rather "esoteric" in nature.

In the 1970s and the early 1980s, I was convinced that the Soviet power was doomed, for dying was the ideology that constituted its "soul." I saw it as a weak and senile old man and the evolution of the regime as "corruption developing into liberalism." I was sure that ultimately a system shaped after a Western model was to establish itself and I saw it not as an ideal but just as another stage of human development. However, these prospects looked very remote to me. I was of the opinion that between the Soviet government and democracy there should be a period of radical change of ideological symbols with preservation of the basic contours of the Soviet system. I defined it as a relatively short period of "sluggish fascism." I used the word "sluggish" because the era of powerful ideologies was over and a kind of fascism in the future could only be "sluggish" and non-serious. At one time, it seemed to me that Solzhenitsyn could become its ideologist. I amused myself with inventing funny, in my opinion, formulas to be found in newspapers of the post-Soviet future, which would be a blend of new symbols and old substance, like "the village elder of the Sergius of Radonezh agricultural community reported at a meeting a new corn variety lovingly called 'The White Guard' by farmers." Of course, the collapse of the Soviet power and the advent of "fascism" were to be accompanied by some social cataclysm which I feared but hoped I would not live that long to see it happen. I could not understand which form it might take. At one time, I thought there might even be a military coup. In general, this scenario proved to be rather close to reality. However, it lacked Gorbachev.

I was convinced that the mechanism of social mobility, particularly in the sphere of politics, in a state based on an ideology that was already dead, operated in such a way that getting to its "top" was possible only to fools or scoundrels, with the latter eventually turning into fools themselves as a result of endless talking nonsense. My view seemed to me to be confirmed by photos of members of the Politburo.

Today I realize that my conviction of those days, which is in conflict with the advent of Gorbachev, was wrong. However, even now, Gorbachev's successful career in the Party is a puzzle to me. I think that his coming to power was the realization of the least possible scenario in history, a kind of winning a lottery — such things do happen sometimes; however, chances are very low for that and it is silly to hope for them to happen.

2. Perestroika

My amazement was enormous when it became clear after Gorbachev came to power that he was a man consciously leading the country to freedom. Gorbachev did not at all fit into my scenario and I perceived him as a God given opportunity to escape its realization and start orderly, rather than disastrous — through a coup and a victory of "sluggish fascism," — movement towards democracy.

Of course, I was far from thinking that Gorbachev was capable of bringing us to "bourgeois democracy," which seemed to me a prospect for the 21st Century, the times that were not that close in those days. What seemed to me as a real prospect was precisely "Perestroika," "Socialism with a human face" and "Marxist and Leninist reform." I believed in the possible transformation of the CPSU into a party that would be socialist, of course, but of parliamentary type and retaining its role for a long time, like the Indian National Congress. It had to be a party regularly winning elections and incapable of uniting the radical opposition presented by orthodox communists, radical champions of capitalism and various nationalists and separatists. The dominance of such a party for some 25 to 30 years could pave the road for future advancement. It was only in Gorbachev's time that I started traveling abroad. I was sent to Chicago to attend some American gathering discussing Perestroika (I don't think I understood what kind of gathering it was back then and I absolutely do not remember it now). As I was making my speech, an American from the audience asked me if I believed in democratization with the CPSU in power. I replied saying that Great Britain was a country as free as the United States, but a monarchy that even had a House of Lords and a state church. If putting of new substance into a medieval form is possible, then why not do the same thing with the form of the Soviet government and the CPSU?

I was delighted with "new thinking." It seemed to me I was a witness of a great process, when another great ideology and tradition, a communist one, was being added to various spiritual traditions embracing liberal values. It seemed to me that Gorbachev's role was similar to that of Pope John XXIII or Pope John Paul II. Catholicism succeeded in rethinking its past, with its inquisitions and crusades, without denouncing it and adding its own "touch" to the modern democratic world. My thoughts were about us doing the same thing: rethinking our own past — precisely rethinking and not just denouncing it — and adding to the "chorus" of modern democracy the striving for a "bright future" characteristic of the communist ideology and the creative impulse of some common efforts towards the development of humanity. I thought it was exactly what the "free world" lacked.

I have never been a "patriot." I was of the opinion that one does not choose his country and if born in this country, one must try to make it better. Leaving for the West never was my aspiration. But I was never proud of my country, although, unlike many of my acquaintances, I did not consider it to be an extremely dreadful place. It was only in Gorbachev's time that I started to experience a feeling earlier unknown to me: pride in my country and its leader. This feeling so pleasant and unknown to me before disappeared again after 1991, but I am grateful to my fate and to Gorbachev for letting me experience this feeling during my life-time.

There were two problems that worried me. Firstly, I wanted to take part in the process and help Gorbachev. However, my plans did not at all include taking up modern Soviet problems, particularly, political activity. I had a certain life experience and a research plan I did not want to ruin. Little by little, I got involved (and found myself involved by others) into the "Perestroika" range of problems, although I resisted it and finally broke with the past and abandoned my previous plans only when Perestroika was over. The second problem was much more complicated. I was always of the opinion that for a person earnestly dealing with the humanities in a country with a dominating dogmatic ideology this ideology becomes their natural enemy number one. I even held that any work I published had to be in contradiction with at least one Marxist dogma. Sometimes I made references to Marx and Engels, just consulted the index and checked what they had written on the given theme and I was always lucky to find something that was to the point and "anti-Marxist." However, as for references to Lenin, it was beyond the compromise I could make. I just could not write something like "Lenin was a great man and the ideals of the October Revolution were great," because I saw it as simply shameful. However, the situation became different. The only ideology that could serve as the ideology of Perestroika was

the ideology of "non-dogmatic" Marxism, of the "socialist ideals," the ideals of the Great October Socialist Revolution (with its goals "distorted" later), and of the priority of "values common to all humankind." If I wanted to help Perestroika, I had to start speaking and writing in a way that was different from what it had been before. For me it was a very difficult thing to do. Nevertheless, I published several articles in some popular collections of essays by the Progress Publishing House (titled "There Is No Other Way," "Understanding the Cult of Stalin," and "On the Way to Freedom of Conscience"), in which my emphasis was totally different — I did not state that the teaching of Marx and Lenin was true, but wrote that Marxism was a great tradition in the Russian and world cultures and that it had to be treated seriously, etc.

I began giving some credit to Marxism when everybody had already stopped doing it. Perestroika was quickly developing into a revolution.

Even today when recalling that time I experience the feeling of horror and, frankly speaking, disgust. An acquaintance of mine told me then, "At last the time is right for our generation." In fact, it was true. I do not know why it was in Russia that the youth took no active part in the developments of that time (the role played by the youth in other countries was much more significant). Our revolution was the one made by people aged between 40 and 50, that is, by the people who before that had whiled away the time sitting quietly in their research institutes and kitchens. The great majority of them were members of the Party. Now, with their fear gone, they started to hastily make up for their idleness, lies and time-serving, spilling out everything that had been accumulated over the years of stagnation. And those things that had accumulated were mostly that same passive Westernism, which all of a sudden became active and turned into an ardent anti-communism and that what was dubbed as "Russophobia" by our "patriots."

I hold that "Russophobia," like "Russophilia" ("Slavophilism") are absolutely normal phenomena. Self-consciousness of a people, just like self-consciousness of an individual, should have both love and dislike for oneself. A person who is at all times delighted with his own self is as abnormal as the one always feeling disgust for oneself. However, in the years of stagnation, it was "Russophobia" that had been accumulated and it had accumulated in such quantities as to develop destructive forms. Radicalism and irresponsibility of many pro-active democrats were directly linked to the fact that they never worried too much about the future of this country. It was in that period, with prospects opening up for democratic changes, that many people, including some of my acquaintances, after making some democratic noises, rushed to the West and settled there. It was clear that their plans to settle in the West and their democratic radicalism were interlinked, since they expected to avoid the consequences of these radical attitudes.

The thing started next I called an "orgy." Quiet "scientific workers" or people making careers in the Party were turning into ardent radicals right before my eyes. People were becoming engrossed in reading articles that tried to prove that Marxism was the source of all troubles for Russia (written by staff of the CPSU Central Committee), that social democracy was the main danger and that it ruined the Scandinavian countries (such articles were written by researchers from the Institute of International Working-Class Movement), and so on. In 1989, a person could write about the ideals of Socialism, but already in the year 1990, once they became sure that it would not spell trouble for them, they would write that Socialism and the Soviet government were unreformable.

Everything that could shatter the government was welcome, and people never worried about their demands being in conflict with one another. For instance, everybody supported the Armenians, who sought to take Karabakh from Azerbaijan. I remember how at a gathering at the Moscow Tribune, a club popular at that time, an Azerbaijanian was shushed when the poor fellow tried to explain that he personally strongly condemned the Sumgait pogrom [Translator's

Note: An Azeri-led pogrom that targeted the Armenian population of the seaside town of Sumgait in Azerbaijan in February 1988] and that democrats existed in Azerbaijan, too. They started to demand from him that he immediately admit that Karabakh had to belong to Armenia. However, transfer of a territory from one union republic to another required a very powerful center. Meanwhile, at the same time, everybody demanded broader rights for Republics, weaker Union center, and, later, dissolution of the USSR altogether.

Even today, I cannot fully understand why the people who were not at all brave were fearless when the country's fate was at stake. For instance, they were not afraid that after the dissolution of the USSR our country would turn into a territory where all people would fight against one another, like the former Yugoslavia, but armed with nuclear weapons. The Americans, but not our people, were afraid of that. I personally was terribly afraid of the prospect of dissolution of the USSR; I even wrote an article for *The 20th Century and the World* journal, a popular publication of that time, titled "Be Careful with Empires," where I said that dissolution of empires was a natural process, albeit a risky one, and gave an example of the British presence in Africa: there were no cannibal presidents under the British; however, they appeared after the British left.

I did not know what was happening at the "top," but sometimes I learned things that perturbed me. As an example I will give two episodes that discouraged me greatly, without mentioning any names. I attended a discussion of a new set of plans to reform the USSR held at the Institute of Asian Studies. Presented was a plan drawn by two young scientists. Even a tenth grade school pupil could prepare a plan like that: to hold a referendum on self-determination in all of the Republics and, in case of a part of some Republic opposing it, hold another referendum in that area allowing it to secede from that Republic. I may not remember it full well, but my recollection is more or less accurate. Had this plan been, by any chance, implemented, the whole of the USSR territory would have been flooded with blood. This plan was supposed to be submitted to the Politburo. I said that the plan was childish and should not be sent anywhere, not to feel ashamed of it. However, it was, of course, submitted there. Soon afterwards, I was shocked to learn that its authors met one of the closest associates of Gorbachev, they discussed it in earnest and he gave them much consideration. I realized that the minds of statesmen personifying Perestroika may not differ from those of junior researchers drunk with freedom.

Another example: I spoke with a person, who was important at the time, being a people's deputy and member of the Party Central Committee. I told him that nobody was aware of what was going on in the USSR Republics and that there was an urgent need to establish some research center to study the republics. Naturally, that man interpreted my opinion as a desire to place myself at the head of such a center. He was very well disposed towards me and so he said that if I wanted to deal with autonomies in Russia, then they would set up a relevant organization and provide it with people and money, but the Republics were something different, since (and I quote word for word) "the process of democratization will take place in individual Republics." This phrase, which on the face of it looked totally meaningless, meant that my interlocutor already treated the USSR as no longer existent (and this conversation took place some time in December 1990).

Gorbachev quickly lost his popularity and became a target for attacks and ridicule. I saw them as a manifestation of a slave's mindset. Everybody kept silent when such attitudes were dangerous. Gorbachev made it possible to attack the government and it became clear that he presented no threat to those attacking. Then everybody started attacking the man who gave them freedom. Their behavior reminded that of dogs sitting in a cage and whining until they were let out of the cage by somebody they immediately attacked. I held that behind the democratic radicalism

demonstrated in this situation was a hidden desire to move away from freedom, a subconscious willingness to get back to authoritarianism. People were irritated by Gorbachev's willingness to try to persuade and seek "consensus." They were irritated by the fact that he was a politician of a democratic trend, unlike Yeltsin who filled me with disgust and horror by his being a "Teflon president." In my view, he was talking utter nonsense. He changed his views at a dizzying speed and one felt that he was ready to become even a Muslim for the sake of power. I perceived him as a morally and intellectually sick figure. Still, his attitudes were radical and he spoke like a determined person who was not into "any sorts of consensus."

To me, it seemed a shame that the democratic intelligentsia could find an idol in a person like that. Yeltsin became the leader of a revolution and the founder of a new Russian state, a kind of our own George Washington. I used to say, like nation, like its George Washington.

I was aware that Gorbachev was losing control of the situation but hoped things would settle one way and another. I started to believe more and more that it was time for us to stop at a certain level of freedom and adapt ourselves to it, "digest" it, rather than proceed further.

Today I still remain of the opinion that it was possible to change everything while preserving the CPSU (under a new name) and the USSR (not forever, of course, but for a sufficiently long period of time). The only thing that had to be done was to snap at people in a timely manner. I was waiting for it to happen, but Gorbachev was reluctant to do it and he did not do it.

When GKChP, or SCSE (State Committee for the State of Emergency), emerged, I felt completely at a loss. Had it been Gorbachev's creation, I would have welcomed it. However, the people who placed themselves at its head were unattractive and "inarticulate." It was not clear what they wanted. The only thing clear enough was that they did not want any bloodshed (unlike Yeltsin, who did it later without a moment's hesitation). The notorious press conference given by the SCSE showed clearly that it was good for nothing. I even got the impression that the coup-plotters staged it just to "keep their conscience clear," to say later, "We have offered resistance."

After the August coup, there was an agony. Gorbachev was openly ridiculed at the Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR (for which God punished them later). Yeltsin, who previously used to say to the Republics, "Take as much sovereignty as you can swallow," started threatening them with a war should they secede from the USSR, thinking that now he could take Gorbachev's place. However, later he changed his mind and in December the USSR was done away with. The courage shown by Gorbachev in the course of all these events impressed me greatly; however, no sympathy was shown towards him by the people.

3. Post-Perestroika

After those August events, my life became different. I felt horror at the victory of "democrats" and at the spur of the moment decided to put everything aside and start writing to newspapers and you name it where, explaining that we were heading for a disaster and that the victory of democrats meant the end of democracy and the collapse of the empire meant wars.

However, everything turned out to be better than I had expected. There was no war of all against all. And we managed to prevent a conflict between Russia and Kazakhstan and Ukraine, the most terrible thing that could happen. I was positive that after 1991 it would not take long for an authoritarian regime with a "faschizoid" ideology to emerge. Of course, our system can hardly be called democratic, but at the time I did not believe that freedom of speech would last (even if restrained) until the year 2007 and even 17 years later some democratic institutions would still exist in the country.

Later, I got acquainted with Gorbachev and even worked at his Foundation for one year. I like Gorbachev seeing him close up, too. I like his persistent, although hopeless and naive in my opinion, attempts to create social democracy.

I cannot fail to mention an episode which revealed for me an unexpected side of him. It was in 1996, when he decided to run for President. Of course, I thought that this idea was doomed to complete failure, but being loyal to this man I accepted an invitation to deliver a speech during his visit to the Moscow Tribune, a club that guarded dissident and "near-dissident" traditions. I said then that we should be grateful to him for all the elements of democracy we had at the time. I said that everyone in the audience respected the late Sakharov, including me, of course. But imagine such a person did never exist. What difference could it make? To me, nothing would change. Now imagine there was no Gorbachev — everything would be different — and things would change for the worse. I did not want to tell lies, so I said that I did not know how many votes he would get, but it would be indicative of the degree of readiness for democracy on the part of our nation. My speech was a success, although there was nothing special about it. Still, Gorbachev was deeply impressed by it. Later, he repeated many times both in his speeches and interviews to newspapers that Furman rated his role higher than that of Sakharov, but he absolutely disagreed with the statement that our people were not ready for democracy. He said these words in my presence on two occasions. Until this day, I don't really understand why my assessment of his role in history as being more significant than that of Sakharov was perceived by him as a great compliment.

An opinion that "history will eventually sort things out" is definitely not true. We are unable to fully understand the importance of an event in principle and all the disputes about the significance of Perestroika and Gorbachev will continue for as long as historical science exists. However, I am writing about my own perceptions of his role and the role of Perestroika. I believe that Gorbachev's role in our history is immense, notwithstanding the failure of his plan and his own defeat. I am convinced that the advent of Gorbachev and his Perestroika was not at all the most

The victory of Perestroika, the realization of Gorbachev's project of a gradual movement towards democracy and market with preservation of the state and symbolic spiritual continuity was also, in my opinion, hardly probable, but still possible. Moving along this path involved certain problems and difficulties. However, many hardships could have been avoided. There would have been no war in Chechnya. There would have been no monstrous regimes of Turkmenbashi or Lukashenko. Social stratification would not have taken such enormous proportions. I don't think that this path could have brought us by the year of 2008 to real democracy, with a possible rotation in power of different political forces. However, there is a huge difference between slow movement forward and a failure and going back. Failure always means demoralization of society, followed by frustration.

Of course, Gorbachev is also to blame for his defeat, because he was in a hurry, giving in to the pressure from the radical intelligentsia, whom he gave more consideration than necessary, and was a democratic political leader in a country that was not at all ready for democracy. He wanted a "consensus" on the issues where it could not be reached and tried to use persuasion in the situations where he needed to give frights. To my mind, strange as it may seem for a person who had climbed all the steps of the huge pyramid of hierarchical power, he had a poor knowledge of people. But all of the above "weak points" and "mistakes" of his, as well as many others, were infinitely small when compared with the immensely difficult task he voluntarily took upon himself.

Realization of his project would have been a better scenario than the one that actually took place. However, had there been no such attempt at all, for instance, had the Soviet power collapsed (which was inevitable anyway) as a result of an overthrow of another Chernenko by a group of drunken "patriotic-minded" military, the outcome would have been much much worse.

Still, I think that the importance of Perestroika and Gorbachev is greater than their role in the development of our country in the end of the 20th Century.

It is not clear what makes a great political leader. Our mind is so built that for a great politician we necessarily take a villain who stops at nothing to get power and strengthen and expand it — like Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, and Stalin. Of course, there were political leaders in our history who sought to work for the benefit of their country and its people. But I don't know of a historical leader with whom this striving did not imply striving for power and its expansion. Gorbachev was the only political leader in the Russian history who had full power in his hands and still was consciously ready to restrict it or run the risk of losing it for the sake of ideological and moral values. His criteria of success were different; he played by different rules; he played in politics based on the principles of human ethics. His success should therefore be assessed against these principles.

The rules of politics required him to get things under control before it was too late and launch a kind of SCSE himself, and do it even earlier than in August 1991. Then he would not have suffered a defeat. However, according to his principles, this very thing would have constituted a defeat. According to his principles, his defeat meant his victory.

That is why I consider Gorbachev to be a great political leader, perhaps, the greatest political leader in Russian history. To a certain extent he rehabilitates our history. His success in getting to the very top of the Party hierarchy showed that things were not that hopeless in the Soviet system. His emergence in the Russian political culture showed that things were not that bad in that culture. And finally, since such a statesman was once at the head of our country, then the emergence of a state leader like him is possible in the future, too.