

# **the politics of transition**

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**shaping a  
post-Soviet future**

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# The politics of transition: shaping a post-Soviet future

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The Soviet system has undergone a dramatic transformation: from communist monopoly to multiparty politics, from Marxism to competing values, from centralisation to fragmentation, and from state ownership to a mixed economy. This book, by three of the West's leading scholars of Soviet and post-Soviet affairs, traces the politics of transition in the late 1980s and early 1990s from its origins to its uncertain post-communist future. The authors analyse the full impact of transition on official and popular values, central and local political institutions, the post-Soviet republics, the CPSU and the parties which replaced it, and political participation. A final chapter considers the problematic nature of this form of 'democracy from above'. Detailed but clearly and accessibly written, *The politics of transition* provides an ideal guide to the changes that have been taking place in the politics of the newly independent nations that together constitute a sixth of the world's land surface.

## The politics of transition

## Preface

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The establishment of communist rule in the USSR has reasonably been regarded as the main turning-point of twentieth-century world history.<sup>6</sup> The collapse of that system of government, first in Eastern Europe and then in the USSR itself, marks a turning-point that will hardly be less significant. For more than seven decades a single party had exercised a political monopoly across a sixth of the world's land surface. It dominated the electoral system and the soviets in whose name the revolution had originally taken place. It decided all key appointments, directed the work of government, controlled the mass media, and could draw if it wished upon the assistance of a security apparatus as well as the police and army. All of this was the party's 'leading role', confirmed in the Constitution that was adopted under Leonid Brezhnev's guidance in 1977. The Communist Party, as a party, exercised a broader influence through its relationship with more than 100 communist or workers' parties in other countries; and the USSR, as a state, was the centre of a political and military system that dominated the destinies of about a third of the world's population.

All of this came to an end in the late 1980s, as first of all its East European allies and then the USSR itself abandoned the various characteristics of communist rule. Communist rule in Eastern Europe had been largely an outside imposition and its demise was less remarkable in those countries than the collapse of party authority in the USSR itself, more than seventy years after a revolution that the party had itself precipitated. The stages of that transition were played out before a world-wide media audience: the ideology became less restrictive, the economy less state controlled, the political system less dominated by the Communist Party. In 1989 and 1990, the first competitive elections under Soviet rule saw the widespread rejection of official candidates and the establishment, in at least six of the formerly united Soviet republics, of overtly nationalist administrations. The Communist Party lost members and influence, and in March 1990 its constitutionally guaranteed leading role. After an attempted coup had collapsed in August 1991, the party was itself suppressed. In December 1991 the USSR was replaced by an ill-defined Commonwealth, and post-

communist patterns of politics began to develop in what were now fifteen independent states.

We have attempted, in this book, to outline and analyse this momentous transition from Soviet to post-Soviet politics. We begin with changes in ideology and values, and then consider in turn the electoral and representative system, the central government and presidency, the transition from a federation to independent states and the patterns of politics that have developed in these new states. Further chapters consider the decline of the authority of the CPSU, and the rise of alternative organisations – first of all ‘informals’, and then fully fledged parties – to challenge its formerly dominant position. The newer forms of organised politics that have emerged in post-communist Russia are the focus of a further chapter, with particular emphasis upon business and labour, and we also consider the conclusions that are suggested by opinion polls and by letters to the newspapers and to public institutions during the Soviet and now post-Soviet years. We conclude with some more broadly conceived reflections on the nature of a transition of the Soviet kind in the context of a wider literature on democratic development.

This book has been some time in the making and, although the chapters were written by individual authors (Stephen White in the case of chapters 1, 2, 3 and 11, Graeme Gill in the case of chapters 4, 7, 8 and 12, and Darrell Slider in the case of chapters 5, 6, 9 and 10), it is a genuinely collective endeavour. It was planned in the late 1980s when the three authors arranged to share a platform at the 1990 Harrogate World Congress for Soviet and East European Studies. First drafts of three of the chapters in the book were presented at Harrogate, and three further chapters at a convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies in Miami in 1991. We have circulated our drafts for comment, and met and corresponded on other occasions so as to ensure that the outcome was a coherent book-length study of the Soviet transition. It remains to thank Michael Holdsworth of Cambridge University Press for his interest and encouragement, and the discussants and others who have contributed directly to our work over these years: particularly David Wedgwood Benn, Ronald Hill and Viktor Sheinis. Our own institutions also deserve thanks for having helped to make possible a scholarly collaboration over several years across three continents.

Finally, a note on conventions. In respect of transliteration we have followed the system employed by the Library of Congress, modified in cases where different usages have become familiar to a Western reader (for instance, Alexander rather than Aleksandr, and Yeltsin rather than El'tsin). Glasnost and perestroika have been regarded as English words and are not italicised. And the post-Soviet successor states have been given their

current official designations: for instance, Belarus rather than Belorussia, Kyrgyzstan rather than Kirgizia. These and other changes reflect the political transformation with which our volume is itself concerned.

STEPHEN WHITE

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# 1 Beyond Marxism

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The Soviet system that Gorbachev inherited was 'ideocratic' in character.<sup>1</sup> It was a system, in other words, in which a single ideology – Marxism-Leninism – was fundamental to political life and not open to legitimate challenge. It was, in fact, some time before the varied teachings of Marx, Engels and Lenin were synthesised into Soviet Marxism-Leninism, and some time more before that doctrine in its turn became the only framework of discussion that could be employed in all spheres of public life. As late as 1930 the philosopher Losev could refer to dialectical materialism as a 'lamentable absurdity',<sup>2</sup> and it was not until the years of fully-fledged Stalinism that literature and art, education and public life more generally were brought under close party control. Editors of all newspapers and journals, from these years onwards, were appointed on party instructions; an elaborate system of censorship monitored whatever they produced; and the doctrine of 'socialist realism' (in fact, uncritical support of regime policies) became mandatory in all fields of cultural life. For the theorists of totalitarianism an official ideology of this kind was one of the essential features of a communist system (as it was of Nazi Germany); for others, the regime was simply an 'ideology' or 'utopia in power'.<sup>3</sup>

The place of this official ideology was established, in the Brezhnev years, in the Constitution that was adopted under his guidance in October 1977. The 'highest goal of the Soviet state', its preamble explained, was the 'building of a classless communist society', and it was at this time that the Communist Party was given a correspondingly dominant position in Article 6. There has been a long and inconclusive debate about the extent to which this official ideology was simply a rationalisation of leadership choices, and about the extent to which it actually guided public policy.<sup>4</sup> It was certainly clear, in the post-Stalin era, that this was an ideology that could not openly be contested: it informed the educational system, determined the parameters of public debate, and set limits to all fields of cultural endeavour. It was clear, moreover, that although an official ideology of this kind might not provide a set of unambiguous directives for policymakers, it certainly ruled out a number of options that might otherwise have attracted support. In the

1970s and 1980s these options probably included the dissolution of the collective farms, private ownership of large-scale industry and the establishment of a multiparty system (although it was sometimes pointed out that a limited choice of parties, as in Eastern Europe and in Russia itself after the revolution, was not ruled out indefinitely<sup>5</sup>).

The changes that took place during the Gorbachev years, accordingly, required some reconsideration of official theory. Equally, the reconsideration of official theory that took place during these years encouraged a search for policy alternatives that often might lie outside the boundaries of Marxism, and legitimated a range of options that had been maturing among scholars and practitioners during the years of Brezhnevite stagnation. Many of these were 'children of the 20th Congress', proponents of a more democratic and pluralist socialism of the kind that Khrushchev had encouraged in the late 1950s. Georgii Arbatov, for instance, director of the USA and Canada Institute of the Academy of Sciences, had prepared a lengthy report on the implications of the scientific-technical revolution in the early 1970s. Brezhnev, in the event, locked it away and the proposal to hold a special Central Committee discussion was quietly forgotten, but the report itself eventually reached Gorbachev.<sup>6</sup> A later and better-known example was the 'Novosibirsk report', produced in 1983 by a group of economists under the direction of Tatiana Zaslavskaia, and then leaked to the West; it located the source of Soviet difficulties in bureaucratic, over-centralised forms of management and called directly for perestroika.<sup>7</sup> Zaslavskaia, who met Gorbachev at this time, found him a receptive and understanding audience.<sup>8</sup> Debates of this kind became legitimate once Gorbachev had assumed the party leadership; they facilitated the search for a 'humane, democratic socialism' in the late 1980s, and then – in the early 1990s – a search for societal alternatives that extended well beyond Marxism (indeed, many of these writings identified Marxism itself as the problem).

### **The end of orthodoxy**

Gorbachev's early speeches, in fact, had given relatively little attention to the longer-term objectives he had in mind for Soviet society. His acceptance speech, in March 1985, promised that the strategy worked out at the 26th Party Congress of 1981 would remain unchanged: a policy of the 'acceleration of the country's socioeconomic development [and] the perfection of all aspects of the life of the society'.<sup>9</sup> His first full address to the Central Committee in April 1985 again emphasised the importance of the 26th Congress and called for a 'steady advance' rather than a clear break with earlier policies. There had been 'major successes' in all spheres of public life, Gorbachev insisted; the new state had reached the 'summits of

economic and social progress', while the working man had for the 'first time in history' become the maker of his own destiny. The party's general line, as he explained it, involved the 'perfection of developed socialist society', a characterisation that was thoroughly Brezhnevian in tone. Gorbachev did call for 'further changes and transformations' and for the establishment of a 'qualitatively new state of society, in the broadest sense of the word'; he was also concerned to activate the 'human factor'. It was changes in the economy, however, that would be decisive in any development of this kind, and the speech was largely preoccupied with familiar matters such as technological innovation, labour productivity, waste and financial self-sufficiency.<sup>10</sup>

The most authoritative statement of the party's longer-term purposes was its programme, first adopted in 1903 and then in further editions in 1919 and 1961.<sup>11</sup> The 1961 Programme, hailed by Khrushchev as a 'Communist Manifesto of the modern era', was best known for its promise that the achievement of a fully communist society had become an 'immediate practical task for the Soviet people', and that it would 'in the main' be completed by 1980.<sup>12</sup> These optimistic assumptions were quickly abandoned by Khrushchev's successors, and under Brezhnev it began to be claimed that the USSR had achieved no more than the construction of a 'developed socialist society', whose further evolution into full communism might take half a century or more.<sup>13</sup> The Party Programme of 1961 was clearly difficult to reconcile with these very different perspectives, and the 26th Congress in 1981 agreed with Brezhnev that it was time for a new edition to be prepared. The essentials of the existing programme, Brezhnev explained, were still valid, but twenty years had elapsed since its adoption and there were many developments it had failed to record, among them the fact that Soviet society was proceeding to communism through the stage of 'developed socialism'.<sup>14</sup> Both Andropov and Chernenko, who succeeded Brezhnev as chairmen of the committee that was responsible for preparing a new programme, pointed out that the USSR was 'only at the beginning' of developed socialism and that the transition to the fully communist society of the future would be 'protracted'.<sup>15</sup>

Gorbachev succeeded Chernenko not only as general secretary but also, it emerged, as chairman of the commission preparing the new programme. A draft was published in the central press for public discussion in October 1985; there were many, even within the leadership, who thought the changes so considerable that the new version should be called a fourth Party Programme, not just a revision.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the most striking single change in the new programme was the abandonment of the optimistic perspectives of its Khrushchevian predecessor. The 1961 Programme, for instance, had defined itself as a 'programme for the building of communist society'; the

revised version of 1986 was no more than a programme for the 'perfection of socialism' and claimed only that it offered 'advantages' as compared with capitalism (the 1961 Programme had promised that socialism alone could 'abolish the exploitation of man by man'). The dates and stages by which communism was to be reached disappeared entirely (indeed there was originally some pressure for the Programme to be entirely 'deideologised' with any references to communism confined to the introduction or conclusion).<sup>17</sup> The 1986 Programme, on the contrary, noted that the party did 'not attempt to foresee in detail the features of full communism' and warned that any attempt to advance too rapidly was 'doomed to failure and might cause both political and economic damage'. The collectivist emphases of the 1961 Programme – more and more services such as transport and housing to be provided free of charge, more public catering and shared upbringing of children – found no place in the new text, nor did the promise of a minimum one-month paid holiday for all citizens. The 1986 Programme, similarly, contained no reference to the historic goal of the withering away of the state; its main emphasis was upon practical and short-term objectives, and it struck a disciplinarian rather than utopian note in its references to careerism, nepotism and profiteering.<sup>18</sup>

Both the new version of the programme and a revised set of party rules, which were also approved at the 27th Congress, included a reference to 'developed socialism' (during the period since the 1960s, as the Party Programme put it, the USSR had 'entered the stage of developed socialism'<sup>19</sup>). There had been more than six million letters in connection with the draft programme, Gorbachev told the Congress; some of these had suggested the removal of all references to developed socialism, and others had suggested that the subject be considered at greater length. Yegor Ligachev, at this time a Central Committee Secretary, had gone still further, arguing for the 'all-round perfection of developed socialism', and this formulation was retained until the very last minute.<sup>20</sup> In the end the Programme retained one of the two references in the draft to developed socialism;<sup>21</sup> but the concept did not subsequently figure in the General Secretary's speeches or in party documents, and it was replaced later the same year by the term 'developing socialism' (*razvivaiushchiisia sotsializm*),<sup>22</sup> implying a still earlier stage in the transition towards the communist society of the future. Another term, 'integral socialism' (*tsel'nyi sotsializm*), made a brief appearance in the draft version of the Programme. Soviet society, it was explained, had achieved a 'qualitatively new state of development, in Lenin's words, "integral socialism"';<sup>23</sup> but the reference disappeared entirely in the final version of the Programme and was not subsequently revived.

As Gorbachev told the 19th Party Conference in 1988, they were looking for a socialism that 'renounced everything that deformed socialism in the

1930s and that led to its stagnation in the 1970s', a socialism that would inherit the 'best elements' of the thinking of its founding fathers together with the constructive achievements of other countries and social systems.<sup>24</sup> Gorbachev expanded upon this 'new image of socialism' in an address to party functionaries in July 1989. It would, he explained, be a 'society of free people, a society of and for the working people, built on the principles of humanism, socialist democracy and social justice'. It would be based on a variety of forms of public ownership, which would enable people to be masters of their own lives and give full play to their energy and abilities. Economic development would be based upon self-regulation, with the centre playing a purely coordinating role. It would be a society in which the people would have 'absolute power and the full range of rights', and it would be based on both the 'finest traditions of Soviet democracy and the experience of mankind's democratic evolution'. And in turn, it would be an 'important stage in the advance to communism'. This, however, was no more than a 'general outline', and he called for the scholarly community to develop it in the kind of detail that was required.<sup>25</sup>

Gorbachev himself contributed to this task in an extended statement, 'The socialist idea and revolutionary perestroika', which appeared in *Pravda* in November 1989, drawing upon a series of speeches the Soviet leader had made in the late autumn. If at first he had thought it would be sufficient simply to eliminate various shortcomings in Soviet life, Gorbachev explained, he was now in no doubt that nothing less than a radical reconstruction of the whole of society was necessary. There was no detailed plan to guide this work, nor could there be; but it would certainly avoid the command-administrative methods of the Soviet past and the capitalist methods of the West. A process of this kind – perestroika – would occupy a 'lengthy stage in the historical development of socialism'; its ultimate objective was the establishment of a 'genuinely democratic and self-governing social organism' in place of the bureaucratic system that had come into existence during the Stalin years. Gorbachev had no doubt that the socialist choice in October 1917 had been the right one; and the alternative would almost certainly have been a military dictatorship rather than liberal democracy. Socialism, in any case, had to be conceived as a 'global process'. The experience of other countries and movements, particularly European social democracy, provided much from which they could learn; and the future lay in a cooperative rather than confrontational relationship between the USSR and the wider world from which both sides could benefit.<sup>26</sup>

Official perspectives of this kind were summed up in the 'Programmatic Declaration' adopted by the 28th Party Congress in July 1990. Entitled 'Towards a humane, democratic socialism', the Declaration insisted, as

Gorbachev had done, that the origins of Soviet difficulties were to be found, not in any deficiency of the socialist idea itself, but in the deformations to which it had been subjected in the past. Party dictatorship had led to tyranny and lawlessness; nature had been plundered without restraint; and dogmatism had reigned supreme in the arts. The Declaration included a set of 'urgent anti-crisis measures' to deal with some of these immediate difficulties; for the longer term it envisaged the strengthening of civil liberties, a 'stage-by-stage transition to a market system', international cooperation and democratisation of the party itself.<sup>27</sup> Gorbachev, in his own contribution to the discussion, spoke of a 'civil society of free men and women' with a multiparty system, freedom of thought and information, and 'real government by the people'.<sup>28</sup> He resisted the idea that objectives of this kind could be set down in a textbook, a kind of Stalinist *Short Course*;<sup>29</sup> elsewhere he had rejected the idea of a programme as a kind of 'railway timetable', with routes and dates set out in advance, and resisted all attempts to 'force real life into Procrustean schemes'.<sup>30</sup> Continuing the work of the 20th Congress of 1956, the purpose of the socialism of which Gorbachev conceived was rather different: to 'profoundly democratise and humanise society' and to provide freedom in place of the 'stifling and repressive atmosphere of Stalinism and stagnation'.<sup>31</sup>

The Congress agreed to begin work on a new, fourth Party Programme, replacing the document approved in 1986. There was, in the end, no fourth Programme, because the party had been suspended before its 29th Congress could be convened. In July 1991, however, the Central Committee approved the draft of a new Programme entitled 'Socialism, Democracy, Progress' and made it available for public discussion. Several writers, in the discussion, had urged the CPSU to undertake a 'Bad Godesberg', after the German Social Democratic Programme of 1959 in which the last vestiges of that party's Marxist heritage had been abandoned.<sup>32</sup> The published draft did still commit the party to communism as an 'historic perspective'; but this, as the Leningrad party leader Boris Gidasov commented, was in the spirit of an 'epitaph on a tombstone' (the version considered by the plenum had in fact originally left out all references of this kind<sup>33</sup>). The draft Programme was much briefer than its immediate predecessors; it was also very different in character. It committed the party to a set of basic principles including 'democracy and freedom in all their varied forms', the rule of law, human rights, social justice and international integration, and to a series of more immediate policy objectives. The longer-term aim was the construction of a society based on a mixed economy, political pluralism and 'genuine people's power', which in turn could only be formed in association with a 'new world civilisation'.<sup>34</sup> The new Programme was intended to provide a 'plan of concrete action for today and tomorrow'; it was also, in Gorbachev's

words, an admission that the Soviet model of socialism had suffered a 'strategic defeat' and that the communist ideal was unrealisable in the foreseeable future.<sup>35</sup>

If there was a single concept that was central to this progression, it was political pluralism. For earlier Soviet leaders and writers pluralism had been little more than the ideology of the bourgeoisie.<sup>36</sup> Even Andropov, prepared in other contexts to reconsider some of the central elements of Marxism, saw "'pluralism'" as an 'artificial attempt to create an organised opposition to socialism'.<sup>37</sup> Gorbachev, at least from the summer of 1987, began to suggest a very different conceptualisation. The term first appeared in a discussion with media workers in which he had urged them to ensure that 'socialist pluralism, so to speak', was 'present in every publication'.<sup>38</sup> Speaking to a group of French public figures two months later, he described them as a 'pluralistic complex' and went on, in discussion, to agree that Soviet society was increasingly pluralistic, provided only that it was qualified as 'socialist'.<sup>39</sup> In February 1988 Gorbachev spoke approvingly to the Central Committee of the 'socialist pluralism of opinions' they had begun to experience, and there were even positive references, later in the year, to a 'pluralism of opinions' and a 'pluralism of interests'.<sup>40</sup> There were further supporting references to pluralism, 'socialist' or otherwise, at the 19th Party Conference in the summer of 1988,<sup>41</sup> and at a meeting in Poland Gorbachev even attempted to explain what he meant by the term – it was, at any rate, the opposite of 'uniformity' or 'spiritual conformity'.<sup>42</sup>

In early 1989 Gorbachev was still opposed to 'political pluralism', together with a multiparty system and private property.<sup>43</sup> In the summer of 1989, however, there were positive references, at the First Congress of People's Deputies, to the 'pluralism of opinion' for which it made provision, and then in early 1990, at the same time as the leading role of the party was being abandoned, there were the first positive references to 'political pluralism' itself. Party theorists were meanwhile explaining that 'pluralism' was increasingly being used to refer to aspects of perestroika, above all the 'deep and comprehensive democratisation of society', and pointing up the contrast between 'political pluralism' and the 'political monopolism' of the recent past.<sup>44</sup> The draft Programme of 1991 completed the process by referring to 'political and ideological pluralism' as one of the features of the humane and socialist society that the party would seek to establish in the future, one that would incorporate the notion of a 'civil society' and the opportunity for groups to defend their various interests within a framework of law and guaranteed rights and freedoms for the individual.<sup>45</sup>



### Debating socialist and post-socialist futures

This broad vision of a Soviet, post-Soviet or indeed global future was carried forward in the late 1980s and early 1990s by a group of reform-minded academics and commentators, among them Fedor Burlatsky, Boris Kurashvili, Anatolii Butenko and Georgii Shakhnazarov. Burlatsky, a people's deputy as well as scholar and journalist, attacked the authoritarian, statist socialism that went back beyond Stalin to Peter the Great, and argued instead in favour of a decentralised, self-managing system which drew upon the experience of the New Economic Policy of the 1920s, and which explicitly 'subordinated the state to civil society'. In a society of this kind, as Burlatsky outlined it, there would be a planned but commodity-based economy, a separation of powers between party, state and social organisations, a greater role for public opinion, and the gradual development of a more participatory culture based on what Engels had called the 'associated producers'.<sup>46</sup> For the jurist Boris Kurashvili the future socialist society would still be based upon the elected soviets, but they would be combined with some of the features of a parliamentary and representative system so that government was 'by the people' as well as 'for the people', and so that the 'support democracy' of the past became a 'democracy of participation'.<sup>47</sup> Kurashvili elsewhere expressed support for a form of 'democratic socialism' which would include respect for minority rights, a separation of powers, genuine federalism and a 'socialist multiparty system'.<sup>48</sup> Writing in 1990, Kurashvili continued to support a multiparty system as a means of balancing the presidency and reviving the CPSU, but he was also concerned to maintain the dominance of public ownership and to maximise social equality – an objective that, in his view, was most readily achieved within a socialist framework.<sup>49</sup>

Another contributor to the discussion was Anatolii Butenko, a department head at the Institute of Economics of the World Socialist System at the USSR Academy of Sciences. In his writings of the early 1980s, which were strongly influenced by the Polish crisis, Butenko argued that Soviet-type societies did not eliminate 'contradictions', in particular those between the sectional interests of managers and the working people they directed.<sup>50</sup> Writing subsequently and at greater length, Butenko set out a vision of the Soviet future that was based upon the concept of 'socialist popular self-management' and which involved the abolition of the *nomenklatura* appointments system and a wide-ranging electoral reform.<sup>51</sup> Interviewed in *Pravda* in 1989, Butenko placed the greatest emphasis upon the emancipation of labour as the goal of socialism. This meant more than the elimination of exploitation, which had already been achieved in the Stalinist period: it meant the elimination of the oppression of man by man, which could be