CHAPTER II

STAGNATION TO RESTRUCTURING
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THE INITIAL PHASE, 1985-1986: STAGNATION TO RESTRUCTURING

On 11 March 1985 at a special plenary session of the CPSU central committee Gorbachev was unanimously elected to succeed Konstantin Chernenko as general secretary. His nomination was put forward by the then Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko. Chernenko had died the previous day. It was the swiftest succession in Soviet history following the death of a leader since 1924, when Lenin died and Stalin assumed full control of the party and government. At 54 Gorbachev was also one of the youngest and best educated of Soviet leaders since Lenin.

Soviet newspapers of 12 March broke with tradition by printing Gorbachev's portrait on the front page and that of Chernenko on the second.¹ The change in leadership did not significantly disrupt government functioning. On the 11 March Gromyko held talks and as planned, the Soviet-US disarmament negotiations got underway in Geneva the

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following day.² It was business as usual. And that is exactly what the first two years of Gorbachev ended up being - fundamental changes were beginning to take shape under an apparent veneer of continuity. In Gorbachev's words, "I wanted to gain time by making tactical moves, so as to allow the democratic process to acquire sufficient stability to ease out the old ways and to strengthen people's attachment to the new values".³ But this is the reflective Gorbachev in the aftermath of the coup in August 1991. Without running ahead of time let us return to 1985 and proceed according to our framework of analysis.

We will first try and see whether the Soviet system stood more in favour of change or continuity in 1985 and 1986. Then we'll see the relation between Soviet politics and economics in this period. We'll then try and identify "conjunctural" points where multiple, distinct processes were at work, and finally analyse this period in terms of the gap between theory and practice.

2. 13 March 1985 was declared a national day of mourning by East European allies of the Soviet Union, while institutions and enterprises stopped work for five minutes in the Soviet Union at the time of the burial.

CONTINUITY vs CHANGE

Somehow, 1985 and 1986 would have been two of the most unremarkable years of Gorbachev but for three things that happened in that period. Most of 1985 was spent by Gorbachev in moving in people of his choice and temperament into positions of power. This was a routine move expected of a new leader, but one that was crucial to Gorbachev for the success of his ideas of change. Then there was the 27th Party Congress and the adoption of the new edition of the Kurshchevian programme of 1961. As the preparations for this major event had already begun in Andropov's time and later carried forward by Chernenko, it was another of those routine party jamborees except that Gorbachev had infused it with so much revolutionary spirit that it turned out to be a key event of the period. And finally, when Chernobyl exploded, the lid had been blown off the myth of continuity and the system began to respond to change at a pace that took even Gorbachev by surprise. The system had once again proved that it was more susceptible to change than expected by either Soviet leaders or its detractors in the West. But how did it happen?

Building Authority

Even when Chernenko was alive there were signs that
Gorbachev was perhaps the second in command. Victor Afanasyev, then editor of Pravda, had even referred to him as "our second general secretary", although he retracted it later. The description wasn't entirely misplaced. Gorbachev appeared to have gained greater responsibilities in the overall running of the economy, and it was believed that he had also taken charge of ideological matters from Chernenko, apart from cadre appointments, in 1984 itself. As Chernenko's health grew indifferent the young general secretary in-waiting seems to have started making his moves. In December 1984 itself he gave what was later recognised as the first speech that even spelt out his later policies. He made it clear in that All-Union speech that the process of intensifying the economy must be given the same priority as the country once gave industrialization. "More energy should be devoted to the search of the most effective means of combining economic interests of society, the labour collectives and the individual worker", stressing the need for paying "unflagging attention" to "social questions" and

to "people's needs".\textsuperscript{5} Quite obviously, Gorbachev seemed well prepared with his moves were the mantle to fall on him.

In the month following his appointment as general secretary he first moved Ryzhkov and Ligachev into the politburo.\textsuperscript{6} Their promotion to full membership of the politburo was unusual insofar as neither had previously served even as a candidate member. In July, Gromyko was pushed up to become Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, i.e. President.\textsuperscript{7} This was a move in sharp contrast to what Gorbachev had claimed just a year ago. While nominating Chernenko for President on 11 April 1984 he had supported the idea of combining the posts of party and government head, as had been done under Brezhnev in 1977-1982 and Andropov in 1983-1984. So, quite contrary to expectations, he stated that the role of the general secretary needed to be distinct from that of head of state. The excuse was that the party head must concentrate "to the maximum" on new tasks in both party and economic activity.


\textsuperscript{6} Plenary session of the CPSU, CC on 23 April 1985, reported on Soviet television, SWB, 25 April 1985, SU/7934, C/1.

Between 11 April 1984 and 2 July 1985, however, no change in the economy or party justifying such a change in stance could be discerned. Gorbachev was obviously planning them for the near future then. Intriguingly, however, Gorbachev himself became member of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet on that very day as Gromyko became president, giving himself a government as well as party function. Gorbachev clearly seemed to know what he was doing.

His long-time friend Eduard Shevardnadze was elevated to Gromyko's earlier post of Foreign Minister and to facilitate that Shevardnadze was elected a full member of the politburo just a day before. Needless to say that Shevardnadze was a complete green-horn in foreign policy, but more importantly, he held views that Gorbachev liked. He had once told him on a winter evening in 1984 at Pitsunda, "Everything is rotten. It has to be changed." And curiously enough, Grigory Romanov, Gorbachev's presumed rival among the younger politburo members, retired "on

8. ibid
10. ibid, p.37.
health grounds" at the same time. Boris Yeltsin was elected by the central committee, along with Lev Zaikov, into the secretariat. And this was still July. By September the same year Prime Minister Nikolai Tikhonov resigned "for health reasons" and gave way to the much younger Nikolai Ryzhkov. Ryzhkov's rise was quite unprecedented. The final move was made five months later when the irrepressible Boris Yeltsin replaced Viktor Grishin as head of the Moscow Party. 11 Grishin was considered to be a possible leadership candidate of the older and conservative party elements.

Gorbachev thereby got rid of possible opposition within the CPSU and brought in fresh, young blood before the 27th Party Congress. By keeping Gromyko at the top he managed to give the politburo a semblance of continuity while actually changing its membership radically. It certainly helped him get the veteran Foreign Minister to propose the complete novice Shevardnadze to this vital post.

Reform

Apart from consolidating his position in the party Gorbachev also set into motion a number of measures that Andropov and Chernenko had tried to carry out. Within a week of Gorbachev taking over as general secretary Pravda encouraged CPSU members to criticize party officials who were guilty of unsatisfactory work or corrupt practices.12 This process of self-criticism was not new. After all, it was the only way available for the CPSU to correct itself. What had been taken up by Andropov as a campaign against corruption and inefficiency, concomitant with limited economic reforms, continued, albeit at a more cautious pace, under Chernenko and blossomed under Gorbachev. As we shall see, the first challenge to Moscow as the seat of power came when, as a result of this anti-corruption drive, the first secretary of the party in Alma Ata, Kazakhstan, was removed at the end of 1986. The anti-corruption drive clearly sent out the signal that the CPSU was keen on "cleansing" itself.

Within this continuous effort against corruption there were different shades. Andropov, a former KGB man, was seen by the masses as arguing for a radical break from the past.

He pursued a mopping up operation and an acceleration in economic progress. However, the economic debates on Market-Socialism had already begun in Kosygin's time. Though he belonged to the older generation himself, Andropov fired thousands of elderly, poorly educated apparatchiki, replacing them with young blood. And though Andropov admitted that he had no solutions to the serious economic problems facing the country, he clearly favoured "significant change in the political and ideological superstructure as well." Gorbachev was identifiable therefore, much more with Andropov's approach rather than Chernenko's, who was a Brezhnev protege in comparison. "The fourteen months of Chernenko's 'neo-Brezhnevism' were characterized by stagnation in the economy and political life." And it became a joke to say that, "What they were looking for when they picked Chernenko was a quiet life."


However, what Chernenko did insist on was better contacts with the people - a clear sign that the party was aware of its distance from the people.\textsuperscript{18}

While the anti-corruption drive took off mainly from December 1985, the anti-alcoholism drive was introduced by Gorbachev much earlier. In fact, there were three areas that Gorbachev focussed on the moment he assumed office. Firstly, soon after his election, in his address to the central committee of the CPSU, he stressed on the need to revitalize the economy. Some of the areas he identified included intensification of production, acceleration of scientific and technical progress, emphasis on quality of products rather than quantity and an overhaul of the system of managing the economy as a whole. Secondly, the party newspaper \textit{Pravda} was given a free run in highlighting corruption in high places within a week of Gorbachev assuming office.\textsuperscript{19} And finally, by the first week of April,\textsuperscript{20} the politburo adopted a series of measures that

\textsuperscript{18} Baruch Hazan, \textit{From Brezhnev to Gorbachev: Infighting in the Kremlin} (Boulder, 1987), p.8.

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Pravda}, n.12.

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Pravda}, 5 April 1985, text in \textit{SWB}, 8 April 1985, SU/7919, B/1.
launched a comprehensive attack on alcoholism, which came into effect on the 1st of June 1985.

While it was easy to launch a formal and frontal attack on alcoholism, the attack on corruption and the process of restructuring the economy were far more difficult to manage. However, the principal thrust of Gorbachev's initial efforts were all directed at revitalizing the economy. The radical nature of these efforts became apparent only after the 27th Party Congress in early 1986.

In a sense, the 27th Party Congress seemed to be a watershed between the two years of 1985 and 1986. While 1985 saw greater continuities, with Gorbachev and the CPSU seeming to respond to the grave economic crisis that the USSR had slipped into, 1986 was witness to more changes in comparison, with the Soviet system and events within it beginning to act and react to the stimulus imparted to it the previous year.

Winds of Change

The overtures made in the area of foreign policy over these two years were reflective of this trend. The Warsaw Pact, for instance, was extended for another 20 years on the
26 April 1985. 21 Gromyko was still the Foreign Minister. On 16 January 1986, however, Soviet newspapers carried Gorbachev's proposal of scrapping all nuclear weapons by the year 2000, in stages, over the next 15 years. 22 That was about a month before the 27th Party Congress. The old guard at the Foreign Ministry had also been changed. And on the 15th of August, i.e., nearly six months after the Congress, the Soviet Union made its first formal request to participate in the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) "to promote better commercial and political conditions in the whole of international trade, and expended trade between the Soviet Union and GATT member countries." 23 In fact, the Soviet request was rejected. 24


However, that didn't deter the CPSU. At exactly the same time as the Punta del Este meeting the CPSU central committee and the Council of Ministers empowered some 21 ministries and 67 state enterprise involved in the production of manufactured goods to import and export on their own account outside the control of the Ministry of Foreign Trade.25

All these measures prior and subsequent to the 27th Party Congress were clearly indicative of the CPSU's awareness and commitment to finding radical solutions to the grave economic crisis. Indeed, the measures undertaken went beyond that. They were indicative of a whole new way of thinking. Take for example the literary scene just before and after Gorbachev assumed office. On 25 September 1984 Chernenko, while addressing a meeting of the Union of Writers, called for a return to "socialist realism" to "mould the ideological and moral frame of mind of the people" with more books on "military-patriotic themes".26 Within two years of the winds of change having swept across


the Soviet panorama, G.M. Markov, the first secretary of the Board of the USSR Writers' Union debunked standard Western criticism that Soviet writers follow the dictates of the party. "Our writing is not done at someone else's bidding, but out of an objective need that is born in society itself and takes shape there, rising from the deep wellsprings of the popular consciousness...."27

Thus, from the changes made by Gorbachev in the party and government, in his immediate three-pronged approach upon assuming office (namely, on the need to overhaul the economy and the drive against corruption and alcoholism), the changing overtures in foreign policy and the reflection of all this in the attitude of Soviet writers, one can clearly sense the determination of the new leadership to change rather than maintain status quo.28 While we will make a detailed analysis of the 27th Party Congress and the impact of Chernobyl a little later, it is still possible for us to


28. For a discussion on a pattern of vacillation between the reformist and status quoist positions in the former USSR, see Gordon B. Smith, Soviet Politics: Continuity and Contradiction (Houndmills, 1988), especially, p.325.
see even at this stage of our analysis that the real question for the CPSU in 1985-1986 was, how much to change and at what pace? For this we now need to examine the relation between Soviet economics and politics of this period.

POLITICS AND ECONOMICS

It is always easier to preach rather than practice what is preached. In a country like the former USSR, which came into existence preaching a new political economy to the world, it was always difficult to translate their communist aspirations into reality, although this difficulty was not unique to the USSR or to communism. We will first take a look at the economic front and try and make sense of the entire range of goals that the new leadership in the former Soviet Union seemed to have set its sights on. We will thus link it to the politics of the period.

Old Wine and New Bottles

The trouble with the economic measures sought to be introduced by the CPSU was that they were both new and not new; in substance they were the harbingers of a revolutionary transformation of Soviet practice, but they
were couched in language reminiscent of the economic discourse right from Stalin to Khrushchev to Brezhnev, Andropov and, indeed, Chernenko. It ended up meaning the continuation of old policies, perhaps more vigorously, for the conservatives in the party. For those with a more radical, non-traditional bent of mind it held out the promise of revolutionary transformation.\(^{29}\) And it was not until 1987 that economic reform began to seem like a programme of structural change of the economy as a whole. Its implementation took much longer.\(^{30}\) But what was that language of discourse? Let us make a brief sojourn to the past.

The Soviet leadership was never ignorant of the problems it faced or the solutions they required. The more than half a century of experience in socialist economic endeavour provides convincing confirmation that the direction of the economy is perhaps the most challenging and the most creative task of all those

\(^{29}\) For a discussion on how reforms in the pre-Gorbachev era were a result of the tension between "traditionalists" and "non-traditionalists", see Bruce Parrott, Politics and Technology in the Soviet Union (Cambridge, MA, 1983).

\(^{30}\) This is a view well substantiated by scholars. For instance, see, A. Aslund, Gorbachev's Struggle for Economic Reform (London, 1989) and Richard Sakwa, Gorbachev and His Reforms, 1985-1990 (London, 1990), especially, pp.268-314.
which arise after a revolution... The most important thing that this requires is acceleration of scientific and technical progress... It is well known that for our society the fulfilment of economic tasks is not an end in itself but a means.31

And Brezhnev summed it up even more concisely. "In all the sectors I had to work the problem in the final count was to solve three main tasks: to boost the economy, to carry on ideological-educational work and finally to strengthen the country's defences and fight for lasting peace."32

Andropov, Chernenko and Gorbachev, after Brezhnev, had almost the same things to say. They differed in their emphasis and sense of urgency. And except for Gorbachev, time was against Andropov and Chernenko. Gorbachev was young and belonged to the generation born after 1917. In fact, Gorbachev was born in the Stalin era (1931), but was nourished in the era of Krushchev, the prime of his youth. The language of discourse used by the party was well ingrained in him. At the same time the idea of experimenting with the market to reform the economy was a familiar one and


not so radical, as he had lived the prime of his youth through the era of Kosygin.\textsuperscript{33}

Now, let us contrast the words of Brezhnev, quoted above, with those of Gorbachev at the 27th Party Congress.\textsuperscript{34} He identified acceleration as, "the key to all our problems - immediate and long-term, economic and social, political and ideological, internal and external." This, he clarified, meant "the intensification of production on the basis of scientific and technological progress". And he identified "the prime task of the Party" as one that will reverse the trend in the economy by giving "scope to the initiative and creativity of the masses".

Notice the similarity in the content and expression (italicized) of the thoughts of Brezhnev and Gorbachev. The difference, however, lay in the fact that unlike Brezhnev, Gorbachev meant every word. And he sure had a tough time trying to convince people (who had been listening to more or less the same things for a long time). And so, the first (and only) general secretary of the CPSU to be born after Lenin's death went to the extent of pronouncing upon the

\textsuperscript{33} For a discussion on Kosygin's reforms, see Katz, n.13.
\textsuperscript{34} For a complete version of the 27th Party Congress, see eponymous title: Documents and Resolutions (New Delhi, 1986).
relevance of Lenin, the one leader he had neither seen alive nor heard. Clearly indentifying the reason why all these years there had been much talk of reform and so little action, he said, "any attempt at turning the theory by which we are guided into an assortment of ossified schemes and prescriptions valid everywhere and in all contingencies is most definitely contrary to the essence and spirit of Marxism-Leninism". But even in this exhortation Gorbachev was not saying anything new. Why should anyone take these references to the "essence and spirit" of Marxism-Leninism any more seriously than in the days of no-less than Stalin himself?

More than half a century before Gorbachev's speech (55 years, to be precise) at the 27th Party Congress, this is what Stalin had to say nearly ten congresses ago:

It would be ridiculous to expect that the classical Marxist writers should have elaborated for our benefit ready-made solutions for each and every theoretical problem that might arise in any particular country fifty [sic] or one hundred years afterwards, so that we, the descendants of the classical Marxist writers, might calmly doze

at the fireside and munch ready-made solutions. (General laughter). But we can and should expect of the Marxist-Leninists of our day... that they delve deeply into the essence of Marxism; that they learn to take account of the experience gained.... 36

Of course, the same man had also attributed the "great victory" of collective farming to having "observed the radical advice of Lenin to the letter". 37 It was not surprising, therefore, if conservatives supported Gorbachev for, after all, he seemed to merely be peddling old wine in new bottles.

**Economic Tinkering**

Further, the unrealistic economic goals set in the 27th Party Congress must have only convinced the gerontocracy in the party of Gorbachev's conservative credentials. After all, even the task of framing these goals and presenting them was left to the new, young Prime Minister, Ryzhkov, who placed greater emphasis on rectifying past mistakes, re-

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36. J. Stalin, *Problems of Leninism* (Moscow, 1945), p.635. This was Stalin presenting the report of the Central Committee to the 18th Congress on 10 March 1939, Emphasis added.

equipping existing plant and introducing high technology. Gone was the prescription that Gorbachev had suggested of flexible pricing, cost effectiveness and efficiency.\textsuperscript{38} In its place Ryzhkov promised that the productivity of the Soviet worker would beat world levels. He promised an 80 per cent increase in investments in the engineering sector and for agriculture, a third of all state investments. Output of the economy was to be doubled by the turn of the century, when every family would also have its own flat.\textsuperscript{39}

These ambitious and traditional goals depended on a leap in productivity, which people had precious little reason to expect. Moreover, the increase in consumer choices that Gorbachev had immediately promised could not materialise.\textsuperscript{40} The net result was felt only later in 1989 when strikes paralized the country. In 1986 it was still

\textsuperscript{38} Izvestia, n.35.


\textsuperscript{40} The situation was compounded by a decline in the world prices of oil, gas and coal, thereby reducing the USSR's foreign exchange earnings and leading to a cut in the import of consumer goods.
only the stage for setting targets. Gorbachev kept tinkering with the economic system but real structural change or perestroika still had to wait. In sum, the efforts on the economic front were made through drives against alcoholism, corruption and an ambitious, though traditional, call to arms, to reform the economic system and make it more productive, made at the 27th Party Congress.

In April 1985 the Supreme Court began to issue directions in a series of cases intended to boost efficiency and improve product quality.\textsuperscript{41} It redefined and widened the ambit of quality to make it a criminal offense to produce inferior quality even out of negligence. By June, Gorbachev had hinted at converting Gosplan or the State Planning Committee into a policy think-tank, rather than assigning it the job of setting economic goals.\textsuperscript{42} Gorbachev wanted to make central planning more responsive to demand. The urgency of increasing production was sought to be conveyed through

\textsuperscript{41} 10 April 1985, plenum of USSR Supreme Court on Criminal Accountability for quality of products. Text in Moscow Home Service on 17 April 1985; SWB 19 April 1985, SU/7929, C/2.

\textsuperscript{42} SWB, 13 June 1985, SU/7976, C/14. Gorbachev addressed a conference in Moscow on 11 June 1985 on scientific and technical progress, speaking on the fundamental issues of the party's economic policy. For a full text, see C/1 - C/19.
further propagandistic measures. In August, Soviet
television featured a report on the 50th Anniversary of the
Stakhanovite movement. Its reappearance in the official
media was a step in this direction. Similarly, 7 October
(Constitution Day) and 7-8 November (October Revolution)
were declared working days. In October 1985 Pravda published
the central committee's call for increased production of
consumer goods, whereby non-food commodity production would
increase by 80-90 per cent by the year 2000. In addition, market forces were to have a greater say in the selection
and quality of goods.

Further tinkering came in the form of improving the
agro-industrial complex by planning, financing and managing
it as a single whole at all levels. So came into being
Gosagroprom or the State Agro-Industrial Committee by
abolishing 5 ministries and 1 state committee and
transferring areas of supervision from 3 other ministries to

43. Moscow home service report on 23 Aug. 1985 in SWB, 28
Aug. 1985, SU/8041, B/4. Yakovlev had taken over as head of propaganda earlier in the month, SWB, n.11.

44. Pravda, 9 Oct. 1985 for a summary of the programme.
Tass report on details published in SWB, 10 Oct. 1985
SU/8078, C/1.
it.\textsuperscript{45} Within a year yet another institution came into being, namely, \textit{gospriemka} or the State Quality Inspectorate.\textsuperscript{46} This extra-economic agency was created to ensure quality, thereby not really allowing the market to eliminate low quality goods - a move that certainly did not supplement the measures adopted the previous October. Clearly, quality was not something that could be \textit{imposed} but needed to be ingrained in the work ethnic. And that was an area that didn't lie in the purely economic sphere of human activity.

Thus, there seemed to be some confusion in the politburo about economic reforms. There was clearly a lack of consensus on key policy matters, for instance, pricing. While Gorbachev was advocating more liberal reforms, Ryzhkov continued to be more cautious and traditional. The extent to which Gorbachev was prepared to take criticism of the old system, preached revolutionary transformation and tried hard


\textsuperscript{46} At the same time a law permitting individual labour activity was adopted by the SS on 19 Nov. 1986. Only family members living together could engage in it. Full text in \textit{Pravda}, 21 Nov. 1986, Cf. \textit{SWB}, 26 Nov. 1986, SU/8427, C/1 - C/6.
to convince people of his genuineness, indicated some bureaucratic inertia in implementing reforms. In the meanwhile, the drive against alcoholism didn't seem to be heading anywhere, though the anti-corruption drive was extremely successful. So, there ended up being limited and not so successful economic reforms on the one hand, and a very successful attempt at criticizing the economic system, corruption and the party organisation on the other. Towards the end of 1986, Chernobyl and the Alma Ata riots began to show that while economic reform seemed to be bogged down by the lack of a clear policy and an unwilling bureaucracy, the spirit of self-criticism unleashed by the anti-corruption drive had acquired a momentum of its own.

Let us briefly see what had happened to the political awareness of the nation in this two year period as economic reforms floundered.

Rising Political Consciousness

One of the most respected Soviet scholars, Leonid Kantorovich, a Nobel laureate and winner of the Order of Lenin, openly spoke of the need to transform the economy, rather than have drives to intensify production. In an interview to Izvestia in February 1986 he openly spoke of
how prices must reflect the real costs of production. He was also not in favour of the excessive use of resources and labour. Performance, he felt, should be evaluated over a period of several years. Similarly, the previous month Tatyana Zaslavskaya, another noted Soviet scholar and a staunch supporter of Gorbachev's reforms came out openly to suggest that the success of economic reforms depended on the success of the anti-corruption drive and ensuring social justice. She assailed unearned income. According to her the lack of equal opportunity in education, choice of employment based on area and the status of parents and the rationing of goods were the main reasons for the lack of social justice in the system.

Meanwhile, Boris Yeltsin began hitting out most openly and bluntly at the Moscow city party, a strategic part of the CPSU for obvious reasons. He was also its first secretary. His criticism was quite comprehensive. He blamed


the city party for complacency, uncritical attitudes, lags in construction and transport, dishonesty in trade, poor health care, absenteeism, overstaffing and slack ideological work. This was a mouthful! Two months later, by which time he had replaced Viktor Grishin, he repeated the onslaught in a post-27th Party Congress bash.\textsuperscript{50} Yeltsin, in a sense, demonstrated that the system was encouraging open criticism and that the days of the Gulag and the soft knock on the door in the wee hours of the morning were clearly over.\textsuperscript{51}

With less than a fortnight to go for the 27th Party Congress, Abel Aganbegyan, another noted economist of the Soviet Union, openly criticized and rejected the proposal of the Soviet government to start extensive reclamation of the northern rivers.\textsuperscript{52} This ambitious river diversion project, which involved the diversion of the river Volga, was considered to be disastrous by Aganbegyan. His criticism hit

\textsuperscript{50} For Grishin's replacement see, Izvestia, n.11. And for a report of this blunt speech, which was one among several, see Pravda, 30 March 1986, pp.1-2. Cf. CDSP, vol.38, no.13, 30 April 1986, pp.20-21.


\textsuperscript{52} Aganbegyan was then the head of the Novosibirsk Economics Institute and senior economic advisor to Gorbachev. He was one of the most bitter critics of the scheme. Pravda, 12 Feb. 1986, p.3. See also, CDSP, vol.38, no.7, 19 March 1986, pp.1-3.
pay dirt when the CPSU central committee and the Council of Ministers jointly decided to shelve the scheme on 19 Aug 1986. Public opinion and ecological considerations were said to have influenced the decision. The scheme was originally intended to alleviate the shortage of water for irrigation in the south and reverse a decline in the levels of the Caspian and Aral seas. The money intended for the scheme was then diverted to improve land in the northern and central parts of the USSR and for the modernization of the Volga basin. This was thus, another victory for public opinion.

And finally, there was Gorbachev himself who took the battle for reform from the confines of the party to the streets. In this regard we'll deal with his Vladivostok, Khabarovsk and Krasnodar visits a little later. Suffice it to say now that right after the 27th Party Congress Gorbachev discussed its implications with the media. "Our chief enemy in this undertaking is bureaucratism, and the press should criticize it relentlessly." Ligachev and Yakovlev were present at that meeting.

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The trend seemed to be that while proposals and criticisms of economic reform could be radical, on the ground reforms had to be less than radical. The emphasis on the ground was on radical improvement, while criticism called for radical transformation. The implementation of economic reforms was therefore, understandably slow, while the rewards for criticizing the old system came fast. For instance, Yeltsin's elevation and the actual shelving of the river diversion scheme were both examples of the CPSU's tolerance and its commitment to democratisation, i.e. greater involvement of the people in decision-making.55

However, a curious phenomenon was emerging. As Gorbachev tried to establish the truly revolutionary credentials of his programme of reform, it became necessary to admit, allow and reward self-criticism. Openness or glasnost was one way of convincing people, both in the party and outside, that though the language of economic and ideological discourse used by Gorbachev was not new, he was willing to back it up with action. This policy was not deliberate. It became necessary. This was evident in the way

55. As we shall see, this was the theme hammered upon by Gorbachev since the beginning of 1987.
Chernobyl was handled, for instance. As Gorbachev pushed hard for more reform, greater became the need to attack bureaucratic resistance for the slow pace of implementation. The weather was quite inclement for economic marvels, but the ground was quite fertile for nourishing political awareness.

We shall now turn our attention to how the Soviet system began to transform.

MULTIPLE DISTINCT PROCESSES

Before we move on let us take stock of what we have tried to show so far.

We first saw how Gorbachev's policies seemed to be following the Andropov legacy, as we identified continuities in the system. However, the changes in party personnel made at the top, the palpable change in foreign policy over the two years and the spirit of openness that pervaded even the literateurs of the day seemed to prepare the ground for greater changes, rather than continuities.

Then we noticed that the lack of a clear consensus in economic policy, its stale language of discourse and bureaucratic lethargy almost compelled the leadership to
take the fight for reform to the streets and encourage greater criticisms of the old system. Political consciousness had grew unbridled in its cradle. Its first tests were at Chernobyl and Alma Ata.

In this section we'll now analyse three distinct processes that took hold of the Soviet system. This will include the response to the disaster at Chernobyl, the riots in Alma Ata and the fast moving developments in foreign policy.

The reason for choosing these three is that they reflect the actual state of the Soviet Union at the end of 1986. Chernobyl was the inner self of the USSR that responded to the disaster in a characteristically clandestine fashion, despite the regime's commitment to openness. The riots in Alma Ata were an outcome of the internal turmoil in the USSR and a reflection of the growing political consciousness of the nation. The developments in foreign policy represented the aspiration of the USSR and was its most liberal face. Let us now see how.

It is well known that the Soviet Union handled Chernobyl very ineptly. For all the bravado on openness, which continued even after the Chernobyl disaster, the disaster itself was treated in the old fashioned manner.
While secrecy and denials surrounded Chernobyl, the river diversion scheme was dropped following adverse public opinion. The system was contradicting itself. Perhaps, unanimity was lacking in the party. The disaster had taken everyone by surprise. And the party reacted in an age old though familiar fashion.

The first reports of the nuclear disaster came out on 30 April 1986 in Izvestia in a terse statement of the Council of Ministers. Gorbachev, unsure of how to respond left it to Ryzhkov to face the music initially. Both Pravda and Izvestia claimed that only two people had died. On 1 May 1986, Pravda was in fact categorical in downplaying the disaster:

Certain Western press agencies are spreading rumours to the effect that thousands of people died in the accident at the atomic power station. As has already been reported, in fact two people died and a total of 197 were hospitalized; 49 of them have been discharged from the hospital after examination.

Surprisingly, no less than Boris Yeltsin, the man who didn't hesitate to call a spade a spade when it came to the


Moscow city party, came to the government's rescue. While addressing the Hamburg Congress of the German Communist Party he backed the Soviet government and called Western press reports a "brazen lie".\(^{58}\) And though the accident in the number 4 reactor of the power plant had occurred on 26 April, Gorbachev addressed the nation on television only in mid-May.\(^{59}\) The CPSU politburo held a special muting on 19 July to discuss the report of a government commission into the causes of the accident.\(^{60}\) The result was reprisals in the form of penalties and dismissals.

By August 1986 however, the party and the system had recovered enough to start allowing criticism regarding relief work to start trickling out. The party and the government, after all, was facing tremendous pressure from West European capitals. \textit{Pravda} began to criticize supply

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and discipline problems in the clean-up operation.\textsuperscript{61} It was also reported that military conscripts had protested over being required to spend lengthy periods in contaminated areas. The work involved in cleaning the area of radioactivity and rehabilitating people living around the power plant in Ukraine, was tremendous. A total of 2,000 million roubles in direct and indirect costs was incurred.\textsuperscript{62} This included 400 million roubles for the cost of the reactor. By September the number 1 reactor at Chernobyl was restarted.

Now, Chernobyl was a cataclysm. Its effect would be felt for years and generations on the lives of the people, especially in Ukraine. As an event it demanded that the government be completely honest about the extent of the crisis with its people. In the just concluded 27th Party Congress and in its immediate aftermath, no less than the


\textsuperscript{62.} Finance Minister Boris Gostev at a news conference in Moscow on 19 Sept. 1986; SWB, 23 Sept. 1986, SU/8371, C1/1 - C1/4 carries Soviet television report of 20 Sept. 1986. However, in a politburo meeting on 14 Jan. 1988, the figure was revised to 8000 million roubles; SWB, 16 Jan. 1988, SU/0050, B/1.
general secretary of the CPSU had striven hard to convince one and all of the importance of self-criticism. Yet, the response of the party and the government was quite circumspect initially. This displays a certain lack of conviction in not just the party and the government, but in Gorbachev himself, about the soundness of pursuing openness in functioning. Otherwise, why should he have not said a word for nearly a month after the incident and just let terse denials and distorted facts be published in the name of the Council of Ministers?

Moreover, Chernobyl was also a major international event. For obvious reasons it became very difficult for the Soviet regime to continue to be rigid and old-fashioned in its response to international pressure. Overtures had also been made in foreign policy that (such as the unilateral disarmament measures announced by Gorbachev in the just concluded Congress) had raised the hopes for a change for the better in US-Soviet relations. Peace, according to the

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63. For instance, see Gorbachev's closing speech at the Congress, where he drew attention to Lenin's views on the same subject expressed at the 11th party Congress in 1922, suggesting that revolutionary parties perish because they become too conceited and were afraid of their weaknesses. Pravda, 7 March 1986, pp.1-2. For an English text, see CDSP, vol.38, no.17, 28 May 1986, pp.10-11.
27th Party Congress, was vital for the USSR's own development.64

Thus, Chernobyl forced the regime, in one sense, to open up and stand by its commitment to an honest self-reevaluation. It had once again tested Gorbachev's credibility. And after his drayed response, greater was the need for him to press home his delayed to reform, both at home and abroad. His visits to Vladivostok, Khabarovsk and Krasnodar, all in the period between July and September 1986, coincide very well with the party and the government finally going public about the accident. But these visits at this time were more than mere coincidence, they were almost a compulsion. The choice of not taking some initiative like this and continuing to call for self-criticism as a measure to improve the economy did not exist. It would have meant the complete negation of the 27th Party Congress, still fresh in the minds of people when Chernobyl exploded.

Alma Ata

In December 1986 yet another incident decisively set the course of future politics in the USSR - the riots in

64. 27th Party Congress, n.34.
Almo Ata. The response of the regime was a sharp contrast to Chernobyl. This time the regime was prepared to take affirmative action, rather than wait and be forced into a corner. Here was also a regime confident of getting support from the people. This transformation in the party and government was not sudden and there was, moreover, good reason for it, or so it seemed. Gorbachev had already gone on a major propaganda offensive at home with his visits. Further, he had also made bold proposals for complete nuclear disarmament and opened the doors to the INF treaty at the Reykjavik summit with Ronald Reagan in October. Meanwhile, Pravda continued to publish stories regarding corruption and action taken against those involved in Chernobyl. In fact, the party had gone a step further and asked the journal Kommunist to cover aspects of social and economic change, play greater attention to sociological research and encourage an "open competition of ideas" in

65. These visits were made to (1) Khabarovsk in July, after the politburo had dealt with the report on Chernobyl earlier that month. Here is when Gorbachev spoke of his reforms being "revolutionary", (2) Krasnodar in September, where he spoke again on fearing "democratisation" and attacked the bureaucracy. We'll analyse these visits later.

applying Marxism. 67

This was the environment in which Dinmukhamed Kunayev was removed as first secretary of the Kazakh Communist Party on 16 December 1986. The removal itself was half expected, considering the persistence of reports in the official media exposing corruption and incompetence at the highest levels of the Kazakh administration. The next two days saw student demonstrations that slowly led to rioting in Alma Ata, the capital city of Kazakhstan. 68 By 19 December the situation was officially declared normal. In a dramatic departure from its past practice, the regime allowed the official media to make the news of rioting public, suggesting that "nationalist elements" were responsible for it. They condemned this "nationalist" sentiment but made no bones about linking the riots to the appointment of Gennady Kolbin, an ethnic Russian, as first secretary in place of Kunayev, an ethnic Kazakh. 69 Such news had never before been made public by Soviet authorities.


On 19 December, when the situation was declared "normal", Pravda made a public attack on Brezhnev's leadership on his 80th birth anniversary.70 This was the first such criticism where the leader was mentioned by name. It blamed his last years for the failure to reorganize the economy, complacency, lax handling of cadres, absence of openness and self-criticism and, significantly, the development of negative social phenomena. This was surely a blatant attempt of the party to assert its credentials of openness and lay the blame for this "nationalist" upsurge at Brezhnev's doorstep. Quite obviously, the party was confident of controlling the Alma Ata situation. It also felt confident that the credentials of Kolbin as an honest Russian would far outweigh the credentials of Kunayev as a dishonest Kazakh.71 In this context, the criticism of Brezhnev was not really an aberration. In fact, when Mikhail

70. Pravda, 19 Dec. 1986, p.3. Cf. CDSP, n.68, p.10. Incidentally, Pravda also reported the return of Andrei Sakharov to Moscow the same day. Sakharov's release was confirmed by the Deputy Foreign Minister and Gorbachev himself is said to have spoken to Sakharov conveying the same. Pravda, 20 Dec. 1986, p.5.

71. In Moscow, people were more inclined to treat Alma Ata as a Russian city, considering ethnic Kazakhs were in a minority and over half the population was of Russian or Ukrainian origin.
Solomentsev of the CPSU politburo was dispatched on 20 December to assess the implications of rioting, the party was confident that the real cause of the riots would be found to be something else. Indeed, Solomentsev and Kolbin attended a series of meetings that suggested that discontent over food and other shortages might have contributed to the disorder and accordingly gave directions to improve housing trade, medical services and the supply of consumer goods. 

The label of resurgent "nationalism", however got stuck to the riots in Alma Ata. That was, after all, how the Soviet official media had described it initially. Further, on 30 December Pravda used the occasion of the 64th anniversary of the formation of the Soviet Union to defend the appointment of Russians to senior posts in other republics, asserting that nationalism must be subordinated to the "interests of the state". In fact, Solomentsev

72. SWB, 23 December 1986, SU/8449, B/1 - B/2.


himself was said to have called for respect for "the traditions of internationalism".75

For the confused and fledgling reforms sought to be pursued by the CPSU this was a totally new dimension. And as we have seen, it did not develop in isolation. It developed in conjunction with other factors. The churning of the Soviet system had begun.

**Foreign Affairs**

Foreign policy had a crucial role to play in all this. In fact, it provided the right environment for reform and change within the USSR. This link between external and internal factors, between foreign and domestic issues was not new. It is a well established part of political science. However, in the USSR, to claim that domestic restructuring was indelibly linked to international relations was revolutionary to say the least. This is what Gorbachev did in his "Vladivostok initiative".76 He vividly demonstrated the link between the two. This was indeed "new thinking".

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"The new thinking stressed that revolutions are not essential for economic development but that, on the contrary, economic development is the basis for social revolution." 77

Gorbachev clearly understood the growing importance of the Pacific rim in world trade and the potential it held to help the Soviet Union in its economic development. It also set into motion the process of rapprochement with the Chinese.

The timing of this visit is most significant. As has already been explained earlier in this chapter, the commitments made at the 27th Party Congress and an unprecedented disaster like Chernobyl had almost forced the hand of Gorbachev to prove that he was as good as his word. Having realised that the USSR needed peace to concentrate on its internal problems he was extremely keen in convincing the world of the change in the Soviet perspective of security. It was the one area where Gorbachev could create the maximum impact with the least resistance from the party. His foreign minister was a hand picked man who shared his

77. Sakwa, n.30, p.346.
vision. 78 It was also a well accepted principle within the party that defense expenditure was sapping the Soviet economy of its vitality. 79 It was the one area where he could demonstrate to the world that the Soviet Union was changing. After the Chernobyl disaster picked holes in the party's new image Gorbachev desperately needed to prop up his sagging credibility.

The answer, according to him, was to relentlessly go on making radical proposals in the world arena. It would kill two birds with one stone. If any of them is accepted it would mean less defense expenditure for the Soviet economy. Plus, the proposals in themselves had propaganda value. They forced world opinion to sit up and take notice of the developments in the USSR. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that Gorbachev suggested, in his summit meeting with Reagan, a complete elimination of nuclear weapons in ten years.

78. Shevardnadze, n.9.

The crux of the relentless pace of developments on the foreign policy front lay in just one fundamental change that the USSR was undergoing. This was the complete abandonment of the Stalinist idea of "capitalist encirclement and the dangers it entails for the socialist country". 80 This was a sound policy for Gorbachev to follow. This was the genesis for the momentum that the interaction of international relations with Soviet domestic politics acquired in the years to come.

**GAP BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE**

It is now time for us to bring together the various dimensions of change undergone by the USSR in the years 1985 and 1986. Essentially, in these two years the fundamental change that the system had undergone was to set into motion a process that began to question the very meaning of socialism. In the name of purifying socialism the party actually began to redefine it. This was however, a process that the party was not prepared for. In this section we will see how socialism was understood and, in the light of the sections we have just discussed, how it was practised.

80. Stalin, n.36, p.632.
Towards this end we'll analyze the Third Party Programme, whose revised edition was adopted at the 27th Party Congress. In this context we'll also see how self-criticism had come to occupy a central place in Soviet politics over the years.

The Third Party Programme

Let us first see what was the need to change anything at all in the Third Party Programme of 1961. And then, what was the need to assert that it was not a new programme but only a revision of the third. The point to remember here is that work on the 27th Party Congress and the revision of the 1961 programme was begun in Andropov's time but executed by Gorbachev. And right from the days of Andropov it has been a consistent stand taken by the CPSU that there was a need to revise the programme of 1961.

Krushchev had quite ambitiously suggested in the 1961 programme that the Soviet Union would have overtaken the USA economically by the 1970s. The subsequent period of

81. The text of the revised Party Programme of 1961, with the texts of all the earlier Party Programmes is available in Imam, n.79.
stagnation under Brezhnev, who had in his turn declared that the USSR had reached the stage of developed socialism, made the Soviet Union, and indeed the CPSU, look foolish in the eyes of the world and, more importantly, its own people. In other words, in the early 80s this gap between Soviet theory and practice, between what was promised and what was achieved, between what was claimed and what obtained in reality was simply, palpably irreconcilable.

Andropov noted that there were elements of "isolation from reality" and "undue anticipation" in the existing text, adopted in 1961. He had argued earlier, that it was vital to proceed from the situation that actually existed and avoid both, "ready made solutions" and "unfounded promises and prognoses". Similarly, Chernenko observed that it would be wise to abandon the "superficial concept" of laying down a timetable for the transition to communism. He too favoured a revision of the 1961 programme, such that it could be brought in line with "the real course of social developments." And like Andropov before him, he asserted

82. For a discussion on Andropov's and Chernenko's position, see Stephen White, After Gorbachev (Cambridge, 1993), 4th edn., pp.13-16.

83. Chernenko while addressing a meeting of the CPSU, CC on 25 April 1984. SWB, 27 April 1984, SU/7628, B/1.
that ultimately communism would triumph over capitalism, although capitalism had far from exhausted its reserves.

Speaking at the 27th party Congress, Gorbachev rejected proposals that the revised edition be adopted as the Fourth Party Programme. Gorbachev reasoned that this would only be necessary if the goals that had been set in the 1961 programme had been achieved. He, however, favoured the idea of revising it, so that the new edition would reflect how "translating the tasks of full-scale building of communism into direct practical action ... proved to be premature ... certain miscalculations were made in fixing deadlines - [while] new problems [had arisen] regarding improving socialism... as well as certain questions of international politics". And like his predecessors, Chernenko and Andropov, Gorbachev cautiously supported the description of the stage of social development in the USSR as "developed socialism", suggesting that it be taken to denote the then current policy of socio-economic acceleration.

Finally, the new edition of the 1961 programme gave a nine-point definition of socialism that compared well with

84. Gorbachev's opening speech at the 27th Party Congress, CDSP, n.35.
85. ibid
Brezhnev's definition of developed socialism. It also declared that the advance of humanity towards socialism and communism, "though uneven, complex and controversial, is inexorable". And on a timetable, the CPSU categorically stated that it did not set itself the aim of foreseeing in detail the features of full communism. The new edition in essence spoke of refining socialism, leading finally to the triumph of communism.

Now this is where the confusion begins to confound. Having felt the need to bring the party programme closer to reality, the CPSU still felt it necessary to accept the Brezhneviand description of the stage of social development of the USSR. While Andropov chose to see the USSR merely at the beginning of the long stage of developed socialism, Gorbachev chose to equate it with the socio-economic acceleration undertaken by the party. Further, certain "questions of international politics" were identified that had apparently necessitated a revision of the 1961

86. Revised Third Party Programme text, n.34 and lmam, n.79.
87. ibid
88. White, n.82, p.13.
programme. These questions undoubtedly had to do with peace in the nuclear age. The new edition described itself as "a programme of the struggle for peace and social progress". 89 Meanwhile, the nine-point definition of socialism spoke of a "humanistic Marxist-Leninist ideology", rather than a scientific one and claimed that "national inequality" had been abolished and replaced by "juridical and factual equality" of all peoples and nationalities.

Quite clearly, bridging the gap between theory and practice was limited to removing deadlines and taking cognizance of developments in international politics. The rest, namely, the precise stage of social development of the USSR, the humanistic Marxist-Leninist ideology and the "juridical and factual equality" of nationalities, displayed a confusion about how best to be honest regarding the present without completely abandoning the understanding of socialism so far. 90

89. 27th party Congress, n.34, p.238.

90. In Gorbachev's words; "While holding sacred our great traditions, we do not forget, nor should we forget, about a most important behest from Lenin: more attention to unsolved problems and fewer grand phrases, raptures and exclamations." Tass and Moscow home service, reported in SWB, 10 Nov. 1986, SU/8412, C/23, on the occasion of the 69th Anniversary of the October Revolution. For full text, see C/22 - C/24.
Self-Criticism

The complete repudiation of Brezhnev and the revision of Krushchev's party programme left Gorbachev with just two previous leaders of the Soviet Union to hark back to. One was Stalin and the other Lenin. Quite obviously, if Gorbachev intended to show any continuity at all in the thinking of the CPSU on advancement of socialism, his only choice was Lenin, the founding father. The problem however was that Lenin had been quoted by all leaders of the CPSU since Stalin. Leninism had therefore become stale and lifeless. Yet, harking back to Lenin was the best way to lend credence to what Gorbachev believed, in the eyes of the party. The way out was through self-criticism.

This is not to suggest that Gorbachev or the CPSU had stopped believing in socialism or Lenin. Far from it. "Ideology [had] now been transformed into a myth and its role [was] to justify the system and not to provide a future-oriented guide for action." 91 The fact of the matter was that the decay of the economy had led to a gradual

irrelevance of ideology. For Gorbachev, therefore, self-criticism was vital to motivate the ordinary citizen to believe in the reforms. As he put it in Krasnodar while attacking the bureaucracy for impeding reforms:

We must not fear the process of democratisation. It not only will not weaken our society, on the contrary, it will strengthen it. It not only will not impair discipline and order, on the contrary, the improvement of affairs will take place on an intelligent basis.\textsuperscript{92}

In his visit to Khabarovsk, earlier in the year, Gorbachev had to literally spell it out to the people that \textit{perestroika} was not merely restructuring. "Restructuring is a capacious word. I would equate the word restructuring with the word revolution."\textsuperscript{93} Yet, he was clear that "we should look for answers to the questions raised by life not outside of socialism but within ... disclosing the potential of a planned economy, socialist democracy and culture and the human factor and relying on the people's vital creativity".\textsuperscript{94} He even defended the broad and open policy of


\textsuperscript{94} ibid, CDSP, pp.1-2.
glasnost, holding that it was only a gain as it infused people with energy and discouraged those bending laws.95

At no point in time was Gorbachev or the CPSU unaware of the repercussions of unbridled self-criticism. Questions were raised in October in Pravda on whether glasnost was eroding the authority of the party.96 In the context of the anti-corruption drive having contributed to the riots in Alma Ata being given publicity in the official media, it is ironical that in September 1986, A. Dashdamirov of the Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences, spoke of "reduced tension" among nationalities being crucial for the party to accomplish its goals.97 His words proved prophetic in 1989.

Thus, it was primarily the gap between what the Soviet Union promised and what it had achieved till the end of the Brezhnev era that provided the impetus for change in 1985. This necessarily led to only a partial reconciliation of theory and practice. The rest was supposed to be achieved in perfecting socialism. However, the events of 1985 and 1986

95. ibid, CDSP, pp.4-5.
96. Pravda, 1 October 1986, p.3, Also, ibid CDSP, p.15.
began to compel the system to redefine socialism, for both the perfection and redefinition of socialism depended on the process of self-criticism.

CONCLUSION

We have shown in this chapter that in the two years, 1985 and 1986, the USSR demonstrated that it was determined to change rather than maintain status quo. However, curiously, as Gorbachev tried hard to establish the revolutionary credentials of his programme of reform, it became necessary to admit, allow and even reward self-criticism. Distinct processes like the accident at Chernobyl, the riots in Alma Ata and the fast and furious pace of developments in foreign policy ensured that the churning of the Soviet system had begun. Soviet domestic politics and international relations had begun interacting and gathering momentum. International relations gained, though the same couldn't be said for Soviet domestic politics. Finally, the gap between what was professed and what was practiced provided the impetus for change. The process of perfecting socialism cleared the way for redefining it.
In the next chapter we will now carry the analysis forward in a similar fashion. If 1985 and 1986 were remarkable for having set into motion certain processes of change in the Soviet system, then 1987 and 1988 were remarkable for their consolidation. These two years began with a bang and ended with a bang; from the first ever multi-candidate elections to the earthquake in Armenia. It was the dawn of a new era.
CHAPTER III

REFORM TO CHANGE