



Gorbachev vs the Soviet power structure: Liberalization of Media Control

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Abstract: This article discusses changes in the media policy of the Soviet Union since 1985. In this, the political path of the new general secretary of the Communist Party, M.S. Gorbachev, and the change of censorship, which has been preserved for years, will be highlighted. In politics, opposite political situations of press and power structures are observed.

Key words: USSR, Voice of America, Comparty, Glasnost, Soviet power structure, Media, TV, Openness.

Soviet mass media, did not only serve as an information network for the people, but also functioned as an instrument or tool for governmental power and control over the flow of information. However, these instruments had their limits. There was for example a limit to the control via television, as TV could reach audiences who both had one and were inclined to watch national channels. In any case, Soviet media had played an important role in shaping official policy and even public opinion. Administrative units such as associations of professionals like the Writer's Union (Glavnoye Literaturniy Komitet-GlavLitKom), the state ministry and her myriad agencies, as well as other organs of state were still in charge of the media when Gorbachev came to power in 1985.¹ The Writer's Union for example would curate publications, press releases, and popular journals and magazines - if given permission by the Soviet power structure.² These official actors also played a critical role in the growth of the mass media in terms of its economics, culture, psychology, and social conditions.³ After all, who will watch propaganda without entertaining TV to lure one in.

Many news outlets considered the advent of Gorbachev's rise to power in 1985, March 11 as the start of a new period of governmental changes. After his speech on disarmament and the reduction of military forces was covered and broadcasted nationwide, riots and other conflicts in the USSR broke out due to economic hardship.⁴

Although *Glasnost* gave many people hope, Soviet power structure members were despairing. She had issued several messages in the press regarding the fact that the whole

¹ TASS: Выступление Генерального секретаря ЦК КПСС товарища С.ГОРБАЧЕВА на Пленуме ЦК КПСС 11 марта 1985 г. (Speech of the General Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee Comrade S. GORBACHEV at the Plenum of the CPSU Central Committee on March 11, 1985) Pravda, March 12. P, 3

² TASS: Важные задачи для прессы (Important press tasks). Pravda 1985, June 27. P, 1. Note: Even about this article SOVIET POWER STRUCTURE informed all USSR's presses how to follow the "Perestroika" and self-censorship.

³ Gumbert, H., L. *Envisioning Socialism: Television and the Cold War in the German Democratic Republic*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press 2014, pp. 107-120

⁴ Scott Shane. *Dismantling Utopia. The end of the USSR*. 1995, pp, 205-225.



media was still under regulation, their regulation.⁵ Through his new policy, Gorbachev had started to oppose the entire historically grown system of Soviet power structure censorship. He condemned the one-of-a-kind laws passed by all Communist Party Secretaries since Stalin that had allowed the Soviet power structure to strengthen its stranglehold over the USSR.⁶ However, since the Soviet power structure loosely monitored Gorbachev as well, he had made them his adversary. As the Soviet power structure had supreme control over all information and reports coming to and from the Kremlin, and because this practice had been legalized over time, Gorbachev was in a vulnerable position. He began to protest.⁷

Reagan, Thatcher, and other Western leaders supported Gorbachev's reform program. They considered Perestroika the most important program of the Soviet Union and expressed that they were willing to assist Gorbachev in his reforms. The key talks at these summits had progressed to the point that the future of *Perestroika* was being discussed on its positive and negative effects. Even though all participants deep inside knew *Perestroika* was the wrong program at the current point in time, Gorbachev refused to admit it.⁸ Even the USSR's economic experts came with a variety of articles suggesting a change of policy, but their opinions were rejected by Gorbachev. A summary of the State Economic Council's report was released in 1990 in the Pravda with the title "Increase the speed of a stable economy in 1989, the USSR's social and economic growth", including these points of criticism unredacted.⁹ The article not only included a comprehensive report on the reform program's ineffectiveness but also urged the government to modify it. Although these economic analyses had been released to the public since 1988, the Communist Party was not in the mood to follow up on their economic wisdom.

The VOA, according to Blackburn in the *The Post-Cold War Public Diplomacy* (1992), was founded based on the United States' cultural imperialist agenda in non-western countries and was backed by Congress. These projects have always been in favor of American foreign policy. This can be glanced from the hardware that the VOA possessed.¹⁰ The following conclusions can be drawn from D. Khalil's technical examination of the history of VOA's radio systems and other technical means over the years. First, the VOA has always been equipped with cutting-edge technology and has made full use of it. Second, the USSR deployed a variety of devices to prevent the VOA from reaching soviet citizens, but the VOA was equipped with technology that could transmit beyond the wave blocking mechanism and reach its audience. Third, each zone had its own wave

⁵ Ibid. pp, 245-276

⁶ Shane 1995. Pp, 99-121

⁷ Jack F. Matlock, Jr., Reagan and Gorbachev: Ending the Cold War. New York: Random House, 2004, pp. 24-36.

⁸ Soviet political dictionary: Kratki slovar-spravochnik agitator-informatora (Short Dictionary and Reference Book for the Agitator and political information Specialist) Moscow. Politizdat 1988. Pp.208-209

⁹ Soviet political dictionary: Kratki slovar-spravochnik agitator-informatora (Short Dictionary and Reference Book for the Agitator and political information Specialist) Moscow. Politizdat 1988. Pp.208-209

¹⁰ Горбачев в редакции «Правды» (M. S. Gorbachev as amended by Pravda). Pravda 1989. Page 1 October 24,



amplifier. This was a result of consistent financing from the US Congress for decades. The VOA and Radio Free Europe, Khalil claims, were two of the most successful technique to spread US propaganda. Because the USSR constantly updated or funded updates of radio and TV blocking devices to protect the Iron Curtain and prevent the infiltration of foreign anti-communist ideas, the VOA likewise had to keep equipping itself with state-of-the-art equipment to overcome this.¹¹

Many who believed the Soviet Union could not be modified from within and changed turned out to be radically mistaken. Although some measure of economic reform had occurred in the USSR and other communist states at various points in time, Gorbachev's radical reform led to some fundamental problems. First, his reforms clashed with the basic organizational values of a communist regime, which was further compounded in the Soviet case by certain special circumstances. Gorbachev believed that the Marxist-Leninist theories he had developed over the years would prevent this clash of organizational values, as the Soviets did consider themselves to be a democratic society of sorts. It had merely been customary to use the term 'socialist' instead of 'democratic' when enacting change.¹² Gorbachev, on the other hand, only tried to enact reform by changing the *political* system of the USSR, and not its foundations.

Even though some western political analysts started to criticize Russian radicals—often Soviet people who had been completely conservative before Gorbachev made the Soviet Union safe for dissent voices—and thus indirectly criticize the USSR's slow pace of political reform,¹³ under Gorbachev the pace of change sped up dramatically after 1987. Of course, Eastern European governments changed much faster in 1989, but that is hardly shocking. The majority of people in Eastern Europe wanted to get rid of their communist government, which they perceived as an instrument of foreign control.¹⁴

Communism in the Warsaw Pact could only survive as long as the Soviet leadership showed willingness to use military force as a last resort to protect her puppet states. In contrast, the Soviet Union with its authoritarian pre-revolutionary history and seven decades of repressive communist rule (whether autocratic or oligarchical) had a 'native' communist government. Russia's transition from a highly centralized political structure to political pluralism and competitive elections in just 3 years was therefore a stunning achievement.

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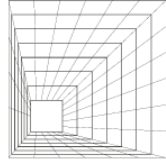
¹² Ibid, pp 451-462

¹³ Michael Kort, A Brief History of Russia. Boston University. Pp, 152-194

¹⁴ Peter Kenez. A History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to the End. University of California, Santa Cruz. Cambridge University Press. 1999, 2006.



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