

commentary

Gorbachev's Openness Is For Real

By Dmitri N. Shalin

It was some two years ago that Mikhail Gorbachev startled the world with his call for *glasnost* (openness) and promised *perestroika* (reconstruction) of Soviet society. As he emerged recently from the Communist Party meeting in Moscow, more powerful than ever, with his economic reforms endorsed, the question was raised in many a head, "Can he deliver?"

No one knows now how much of his rhetoric will be converted into reality, but it is fair to say that there is more substance to match his new style than anybody anticipated just a year ago.

You do not hear Gorbachev thundering about the inevitable clash between capitalism and socialism any more. Rather, he is harping about the "interdependent world" and a "dialogue with the West." This shift in rhetoric has been matched by action in Geneva, where the Soviets endorsed a "zero-option" for intermediate-range missiles. It has been backed up by the Soviet pledge to meet the verification requirements in future arms agreements demanded by the West. And it may well be reflected in the renewed efforts by the Soviets to find a formula for pulling their troops out of Afghanistan.

The superiority of the socialist system is still an official dogma in the U.S.S.R., but you hear less about "mature socialism" these days and more about "market mechanisms." Taking their own advice, Soviets have clipped the wings of bureaucracy, allowed limited private enterprise, endorsed higher salary differentials and invited capitalist firms to join forces with Soviet companies.

The talk about social justice is another interesting portent in Gorbachev's Russia. As it has found its way into public discourse, some of the more egregious abuses in the Soviet power system have been curtailed. More than 100 dissidents have been released from prisons. For the first time in memory, KGB

officials were exposed in the press and taken to court for illegal actions. The removal of D.A. Kunaev, the Kazakhstan party chief, sent a strong signal to party bosses that arbitrary rule and patronage privileges can be checked.

"Democratization" is yet another shibboleth in Gorbachev's rhetoric that promises to leave its mark on the system. Of all precincts in the local elections that took place in the U.S.S.R. last month, 5 percent featured more than one candidate.

One more area where Soviet behavior has been changing lately is mass media. Food shortages, drug addiction, the privileges of party apparatchiks, even the

government. Soviet society is still awash in half-truths and is pathetically inadequate in meeting its members' needs. It would be a mistake, however, to dismiss Gorbachev's reform as a gimmick.

What has been going on in the Soviet Union is a "revolution in style," a massive attempt to reform society by revitalizing public discourse. The rhetoric of *glasnost* is sweeping the country, leaving in its wake changes no one thought possible a year ago. And even though these changes fall short of genuine reconstruction, they prove that rhetoric and reality cannot be far apart.

Style is often perceived as some sort of wrapping that could be readily replaced, while substance is likened to wine that can be poured into a new glass with its properties unchanged. Yet there is no such thing as styleless substance, any more than there is substanceless style. When politicians forgo old rhetoric, they put the substance of their old policies on the line, and when they challenge the status quo, they look for new rhetoric. Not even communists are immune to this dialectic. The attitude I would urge toward Soviet reforms is one of cautious pessimism. I am pessimistic because Gorbachev is facing formidable odds. Balancing the escalating demands of liberals against the mounting resistance of conservatives will tax the new Soviet leaders' political savvy to the limit.

I am cautious in my pessimism because history is full of serendipity, because, as noted historian James Billington observed, "Remarkable changes may well be in store, and could come with the unpredicted suddenness that is so characteristic of Russian history and is invariably later seen to have been predictable." So, let's take heart, watch for changes in Soviet rhetoric and hope Russian history has more surprises in store for all of us.

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deployment of the SS-20 missiles in Eastern Europe are now open to public discussion. Caught in their own rhetoric of a dialogue with the West, Russians have granted Western spokesmen some access to Soviet TV and stopped jamming BBC and Voice of America broadcasts in Russian.

It would be wrong to infer from the above that the gap between Soviet reality and rhetoric has disappeared. *Glasnost* is a sham to the political prisoners of the Perm labor camp No. 36, few of whom have been released under Gorbachev's amnesty. *Perestroika* means very little to the Jewish refuseniks waiting for an exit visa to be issued by the Soviet