Internal Problems Facing the New Soviet Leadership

by

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Introduction
Since the death of Lenin in 1924, the Soviet Union has lived through three distinct phases. The first was the Stalinist period, remembered by the Party for the continual purges amongst its ranks. Second was the Krushchev era which, by its reforms and reorganizations, threatened the existence of the privileged party nomenklatura—those entitled to all manner of material benefits. Finally, we have recently seen the end of the Brezhnev period, distinguished by domestic inertia and the strengthening and modernization of the armed forces. The eighteen years of Brezhnev rule have seemed, outwardly, a period of domestic stability and security. But behind a veneer of calm, a host of problems have gone unaddressed so that the new leadership faces many serious difficulties overdue for remedy. By avoiding change, Brezhnev has willed his successors some embarrassing debts.

This article examines some of the USSR’s internal problems and advances the idea that the Soviet system may alter radically and rapidly within the present decade. This proposal is in contrast with most Western analyses, which view change in Soviet policies as gradual, predictable and limited.

Domestic Problems
Even before Brezhnev’s death, there were signs of pressure within the party hierarchy to move away from a policy of extreme conservatism. This antagonism manifested itself in public with anti-Brezhnev statements—such as the article which ridiculed Brezhnev in the December 1981 edition of Aurora. Such criticism was not invariably destructive and negative in nature. There was one tendency in the hierarchy that proposed constructive, alternative policies. However, both the destructive and the positive critics shared one belief: the problems which had developed in the USSR could not be solved within the contemporary political and social climates.

Problems now facing the new leadership cover a wide range including the economy, social and moral decay, centrifugal forces within the USSR, relations with Eastern Europe and China, and army morale. Reports on the Soviet economy indicate fundamental problems exist side-by-side with vast natural wealth.

The economic burdens are huge. Defence spending of all kinds now takes between 14 and 17 percent of Soviet GNP. Soviet subsidies to Eastern Europe are now also substantial, estimated at some 3,374 million dollars in 1981. The Soviet Union also is committed to sup-
plying annually 10 million tonnes of oil to Cuba, fighting an expensive guerilla war in Afghanistan, and financially supporting revolutionary regimes in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

As if this were not enough, that year’s third bad harvest in a row saddled Soviet planners with a bill of at least 10 million million dollars for the import of 43 million tonnes of grain, large quantities of sugar, potatoes, soya, meat, butter and other agricultural goods. Furthermore, the terms of trade have now moved against the Soviet Union. Greater fuel efficiency, higher interest rates and the recession in the Western world have reduced the demand for the Soviet Union’s main hard currency exports.7

Formal rationing, a rarity until the mid 1970s, had by 1981 taken hold in many parts of the USSR. The extent of the rationing depended on the distance of the consumer from the farm. In the cities along the Volga, consumers were rationed to two kilos of meat a month. In Siberia there were reports of rationing down to half that amount. If one compares this with the average three kilos per month consumption of meat by Poles it is obvious why the Russians were not impressed by pleas from these starving allies. Butter, margarine, cooking oil, soap, sugar fruits (if available) were also reported to be tightly rationed in parts of the Soviet Union. The supply of vegetables was worse last winter than for many years. Shortage of bread has been reported and official propaganda has urged people not to be wasteful with wheat and flour and not to feed the subsidized bread to livestock. Nevertheless, in the main cities, visitors have seen signs of improved living standards, and it remains difficult to judge accurately the real state of food supplies across the Soviet Union.8

The USSR is also running down its deposits with Western banks and borrowing more to pay for Western equipment going into the Yamal-Western Europe gas pipeline. Large credit deals have recently been confirmed with Sweden, France, Germany and Holland.9 However, because of US opposition, this valuable source of foreign currency—the Soviet gas pipeline—is now likely to cost more and take longer to build than originally planned. Until 1982 the USSR had not borrowed heavily on the Western credit market; this was due to the rising currency earnings of the Soviet Union. Now, however, these earnings are under serious pressure, the exportable oil surpluses are dropping and the gas exports will not fully compensate until the end of this decade at the earliest. Moreover, 72 percent of Soviet hard currency earnings came from energy exports in 1981.10 The problem for the Soviets is, therefore, how to pay for the technological imports that are needed by the economy when there is no obvious way in which the foreign currency can be earned.

If problems were restricted to the economic situation alone, there might be possibilities for gradual reform of the system. But added to the economic problems the Soviet system has several others. The ruling regime, now over 60 years old, has reached a state of senility far beyond its actual age. This is true not only of the chronological
Under Brezhnev, the ideology of Marxism-Leninism became the measuring stick of conformity rather than the youthful dynamo to the great classless tomorrow. In the USSR people say one thing, do another and think a third. As Vladimir Bukovsky points out, "The first convinced Marxist I ever met was when I deported to the West." This lack of fundamental belief has led to two developments: a growth of social decay and a revival in religious and national identities. The decline in the ideology and the official toleration of flourishing black market activities have had strong repercussions on the social environment. Corruption has become ingrained in the system itself and recently there has been official evidence that inflated figures are far from new in Soviet economic practice. Nor has corruption been confined to the lower orders of society. It seems that on 27 December 1981 diamonds were stolen from the home of a female lion-tamer with the famous Moscow circus and were found in the possession of Boris Buryatiya, a singer in the choir of the Bolshoi Theatre. The complications arose because Boris, known as "the Gipsy" (Tsigan), was notorious for his flamboyant life style and for boasting of his immunity from arrest as the current "close friend" of Brezhnev's daughter Galina, 53. She in turn is married to Lieutenant General Yury Churbanov, First Deputy Head of the MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs) police, which was investigating the theft.

The nature of the case brought in the KGB, which has long been attempting to stamp out bribery and speculation in valuables and hard currency. According to "inside reports", the KGB’s Deputy Head Semen Tsvigun himself took the dangerous decision to arrest Buryatiya without consulting the Politburo but was taken to task by a furious Mikhail A. Suslov, the ideological purist, determined to suppress any scandal. Tsvigun was told pointedly that he had no future and on 20 January 1982 committed suicide. He was 64, young enough in the milieu of the Soviet leadership. Within days of raging at Tsvigun, the story has it, Suslov himself had a stroke and died.

Buryatiya was arrested on 29 January 1982, when Brezhnev and the other leaders were attending Suslov’s funeral. Buryatiya implicated Galina and the national director of Soviet circuses, Anatoly Kolevatov, who was arrested on 17 February when diamonds and foreign currency worth over $1 million were discovered in his flat. He had made a practice of accepting "presents" from performers allowed to travel abroad. There were other high-level scandals, one involving Brezhnev’s son Yuri.
Drunkenness is another major problem. A Soviet factory near Moscow, which employed 3,000 workers, decided to crack down on its labour force arriving unfit for work in the morning. The result of the campaign was that over 700 workers were disciplined for drunkenness at work. Alcoholism is also considered the main cause of rising death rates in almost every age group. Average life span for males, for example, has fallen from 66 in 1960 to 62 in 1981. Women have not been spared—on average they can be expected to live to 68 today, compared to 73 a decade ago. Throughout the rest of the industrialized world, modern amenities like medicine, clean water and improved diet have brought radical improvement in longevity. In the USSR, however, the situation has deteriorated since 1965. These conditions have almost certainly contributed to the sickness problem among infants.

Infant mortality is rife throughout the Soviet Union. A US Census Bureau report by Christopher Davis and Murray Feshbach shows that even on conservative analysis deaths are now taking place at a rate of 35 per 1,000 births, two and a half times the British rate. Birth defects are also alarming. The number of genetically defective children in state care is rising at a rate of 200,000 a year, that is, 3 percent of all children born in 1980 were born mentally or physically handicapped.

Social decay is also reflected in the family unit. Dr. Tremel of Duke University has pointed out that a Soviet urban family spends the same percentage of its family income on alcohol as an American spends on food. Therefore it is not surprising that over 60 percent of marriages end in divorce within the first year. The high divorce rate has led to a sharp decline in birth rates. In 1980 the Soviet Union had more abortions than any other country and three times as many as the USA. According to Soviet statistics, many women have six to eight abortions during their lifetimes. Some have as many as fifteen. Soviet medical reports put the ratio of abortions to live births between two and a half to one, and four to one. Of course, this also reflects the difficulty of obtaining contraceptives.

The economic and social pressures to have abortions are also strong. Over 60 percent of first abortions occur among 19 to 26 year olds, often unmarried students and workers living in hostels and communal flats who are unable to support a child. Many married women have regular abortions after the first child because their flats are too cramped and two parents' earnings are too low to afford a larger family. Other disincentives include poor family allowance, limited space in nurseries and day centres, as well as the high divorce rate.

This social decay has resulted in the rise of crime and disorder. Mugging and petty crime (judging from the amount of articles appearing in the Soviet press on the subject as no official figures are available) have increased dramatically in the last few years. In extreme instances teenagers have killed their peers to steal their Levi jeans. Of course crime is a global problem, by no means confined to any
one social system. However, the problem for the Soviets is that these tendencies show no signs of decreasing. On the contrary, they are on the increase, while the resources necessary to deal with these problems are decreasing. Social programmes are the first to suffer cuts in any system.

Health spending is easily cut, points out Nick Eberstadt. Concluding his study on Soviet medicine, he says: "During the 1980s it may become increasingly clear that we are witnessing a wearing down of the [Soviet] system. Those who would discount the effects of the Soviet health crisis on international politics, or would see within that crisis only incentives for an inward turn in Moscow's attentions, should also consider whether this unhappy situation might have profound consequences for the rest of the world as well."²⁵

It seems obvious that the Soviet system as it has survived for the last decade—a conservative, cautious, doddering society—must radically and fundamentally alter in the present decade. The Economist has argued that "This breakdown of Communism as an internal economic system may bring counter-revolution before the end of this century, but it does not make Russia's nervous apparatchiks more eager to surrender to external financial pressure now."²⁶ The Russian anti-Communist Naroda Trudovoi Soyuz Rossiskikh Solidoristov (Alliance of Russian Solidarists, generally known by its initialization NTS) puts the point with greater clarity. Its statement says:

It is the considered opinion of the NTS that the Soviet regime is inherently metastable. This is, above all, a result of the accelerated obsolescence of the regime itself, an irreversible and exponential process. Both inaction or any conceivable action open to the regime only accelerates this process. Any attempt by the West to stabilize the Soviet regime, whether by economic assistance, diplomatic face-saving or political concessions, will, at best, have only cosmetic results. At worst, they compound the problem by granting the Soviet leadership foreign policy gains with which to mask the internal deterioration.²⁷

**Internal Opposition Forces**

One can argue, therefore, that the problem for the Western world is no longer merely how to stabilize the Soviet regime, and dissuade it from aggression by building military alliances to contain the Soviet empire, but to look at possible alternatives which exist today in the USSR, on which a post-Andropov Russia could be built. Within the general climate of discontent caused by the inadequacies of Soviet life, there are five distinct tendencies with which the regime has to deal. They are: the emigrants, the dissidents, the technocrats, the non-Russian nationalist currents, and the movement for spiritual and national rebirth. Each is discussed in turn.

*The emigrants.* Quantitatively estimated at 1-3 million, this group consists predominantly of Jews and ethnic Germans.²⁸ Its main concern and the object of its activism is emigration and
assimilation in Israel, in West Germany or in other industrial countries. Its outward orientation makes the "emigrant" group particularly visible to the Western observer but irrelevant in terms of the Soviet Union's political future.29

The dissidents. A highly visible and articulate group with a number of well-known spokesmen increasingly to be found abroad. Socially, this group consists almost exclusively of persons from the relatively privileged Soviet upper-middle class. The "dissidents" have a distinctly elitist inclination to distrust the average citizen and his ability to use freedom constructively. They either profess one or another variety of socialist convictions, or take an aggressively non-political stand; essentially, they do not challenge the legitimacy of the Communist dictatorship. They ask this dictatorship to become benevolent and to extend those rights which will benefit primarily the upper-middle class.30. The exclusion of the "unenlightened masses" from most dissidents' concern is reflected in their choice of which human rights to defend. Thus, of the 30 articles in the UN Declaration, No. 13.2 (freedom to travel abroad) and No. 19 (freedom of expression) are emphasized, while such articles as No. 21 (right to participate in public affairs, free elections, secret ballot) and No. 23.4 (freedom to form independent labour associations) are usually ignored.31 This isolation from the average man is the central weakness of the "dissident" movement.

The technocrats. A highly pragmatic group from the Soviet upper class, secure in the knowledge that they and their skills will earn them a privileged position under any regime, the "technocrats" are motivated primarily by their opposition to the bungling and inefficient party management. They are to be found in the armed forces, as well as in the scientific and industrial establishment.32 The "technocrats" are not particularly democratic by conviction, but they recognize the necessity of democratization as a way to improve productivity, to achieve economic growth, and to bridge the technological gap.33 They also realize that the slogan "to overtake and surpass the USA" is fundamentally false, since they are aware of the crucial decisions facing the leading industrial nations in the fields of ecology, energy, consumer patterns, etc. They see their most important task in charting a short-cut, without blind emulation of the West and learning from its mistakes, thus leading the USSR to a point in the future towards which the developed nations of the world are inevitably heading.

The movement for "spiritual and national rebirth." Unlike the "dissident" movement, with its narrow base but many well-known spokesmen, this is a mass movement with few prominent flag-bearers. Its main components are a religious revival and a growth of national awareness. In both areas, interrelated and often overlapping, an increasing activism finds an echo in a large and
growing segment of the population. To note one figure as an indication, the officially listed members of the Russian Orthodox Church alone number 30 million. In a political system where religion is always a handicap and often grounds for persecution, these are impressive figures. Some of the most widespread and sustained underground activity (mutual assistance, printing and distribution, proselytizing, smuggling religious texts from abroad) is to be found in this “renaissance” milieu. Lately an increase in open forms of activism can be noted, such as the formation of committees for the defence of believers’ rights. The Russian “national awareness” movement ranges from such quasi-officially tolerated figures as the painter Ilya Glazounov and the writer Vladimir Soloukhin, to such officially condemned figures as Nobel laureate, exiled author Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the imprisoned publicist Vladimir Osipov, underground leader Ogurtsov, and many others. Most recent samizdat publications (Vetchie, Moskovski Sbornik, etc.) reflect tendencies of the national or religious currents in the “renaissance” movement. Dr. Richard Pipes, advisor on Soviet affairs to the National Security Council, has noted the significance of the Russian nationalist tendency. Dr. Pipes argues that,

The people who now run the Soviet Union are really very hawkish, and the alternative to them is not a still more hawkish group, but rather a group that is more reform-minded. These are dedicated, intelligent Russian nationalists who believe that a hostility to the U.S. and confrontation abroad may have become counter-productive: they worry whether the Soviet economy can support such egregious imperialism. I think it is worth a gamble to support those elements.

Two well-known Soviet writers, V. Sosnora and Vladimir Soloukhin, have published with Possev Publishing House in West Germany. This Russian émigré publishing business is closely associated with the Russian opposition party, Narodo Trudovoj Soy (NTZ), which Yuri Andropov as Head of the KGB once described as “Enemy Number 1 of the Soviet State.”

Prior to the death of Brezhnev, at least, Sosnora and Soloukhin had not been arrested nor had they been deprived of the Soviet writers’ union membership, a strange twist of policy or fate. 

The non-Russian “nationalist currents”. Without differentiating between federalist and separatist currents, it is safe to assume that a great majority of the non-Russian Soviet citizens seek a more distinct national identity. The Lenin formula, “national in form, socialist in substance,” proved highly unsatisfactory. Radically new principles for relationships between ethnic groups in the USSR are necessary and must be found—a task beyond the capacity of the Communist regime.
The fundamental characteristics of the “renaissance” and the non-Russian nationalist currents are their massive base, accelerating growth, and the durability of their appeal. They express opinions and emotions which will not only endure after the demise of dictatorship, but will also determine, to a great extent, the political makeup of a post-Communist USSR. This fact applies particularly to the Central Asian minority groups who are an increasing force both economically and politically. The growth of Asian economic and political power is primarily due to their relative demographic increase in relation to the Slav population of the USSR.

Domestic Trends

A number of points can be drawn from the loosely collated pieces of information. First, the facts do all indicate that Brezhnev’s period of status quo in domestic policy was coming to an end even before his death. Secondly, the eclipse of the Brezhnev era coincides with some serious structural problems within the Soviet economic, political and social systems which cannot be solved within the old Brezhnev conceptual framework. Thirdly, at no time since the 1920s has the Soviet Empire been so susceptible to pressure from within or from abroad, for the economic and financial links with the outside world as well as the growth of consumer demand within the USSR have proved difficult factors to ignore. Finally, the Soviet Union is today witnessing a wide array of groupings developing within the very structure of its own elite society, which are in contradiction of the official Party line and at times radically hostile to the foundations of Marxism-Leninism. These groupings are not what the Western world has come to understand by the term dissident, although there are dissidents who share the notions of what has been described as the “upper underground.”

Yuri Andropov probably feels secure in relation to the KGB and MVD, important instruments of power in the USSR. It would seem from his early statements and apparent accord with the Defence Minister, Dmitri Ustinov, that he has the support of the armed forces, even though this may be at the price of continued high defence expenditures. Andropov’s control over the Party has yet to be consolidated, but his short period as secretary between leaving the KGB and becoming Party Chairman seems to have been well spent. His main problem, one that has also exasperated such Western leaders as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, may be the bureaucracy. An honest assessment might elevate this self-serving, all-powerful but amorphous mass to “Enemy No. 1 of the Soviet State,” yet it is the inevitable creation of Marxism-Leninism, just as the lesser Western counterparts are the legacies of democratic socialism. Reports suggest a powerful thrust is being planned by Andropov to make the Soviet bureaucracy work efficiently. It is because the writer believes this to be an impossible task that he predicts change in Soviet society of a more profound character. If, as seems to be the case, Andropov combines his striving for greater efficiency with a drive against ideological...
and political impurity, the internal tensions within the Soviet Union seem certain to increase. Moreover, the extent and the direction of change in the USSR can be influenced by the Western democracies. This begs a bigger question.

**A Role for the West?**

Should the West become involved in Soviet internal development? At present, the democracies tend to evade this question. Only with the Reagan Administration is there a sincere desire to operate across the broad spectrum of political activities sometimes described as “low intensity conflict” to change the course of Soviet affairs. Yet, it may be felt, no country that values democracy and truth has the moral right to deny these benefits to the Soviet and East European people, any more than our denying life to millions of Jews in Nazi Europe by our failure to comprehend and respond to the holocaust can be condoned. Moreover, since the Soviets conduct incessant ideological and political warfare against the West, our failure to respond weighs the scale heavily in Moscow’s favour, perhaps making full-scale war more likely. President Reagan has said:

... the Soviet Union is not immune from the reality of what is going on in the world. It has happened in the past: a small ruling elite either mistakenly attempts to ease domestic unrest through greater repression and foreign adventure or it chooses a wiser course—it begins to allow its people a voice in their own destiny... What I am describing now is a plan and a hope for the long term—the march of freedom and democracy which will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash heap of history as it has left other tyrannies which stifle the freedom and muzzle the self-expression of the people.

If the West is serious in such an intention, we shall have to analyze the various forces which can influence change in the Soviet Union. As Dr. Shtrumos has pointed out, “To adequately prepare and meet this change one must first of all be aware of the possibilities of change and all its variations. This can be achieved only by a thorough study and scrutiny of Soviet and East European societies from the point of view of the trends making for change.” Once this has been done one has to look at the tools which are available to influence the direction and the extent of change in the USSR. In the writer’s opinion, this should be given high priority.

**Footnotes**

1. The Kosygin economic reforms, for example, were simply lost in the bureaucracy and never implemented.


7. Anthony Robson, op. cit.


13. Ilya Zemtsov, *La Corruption en Union Soviétique* (Paris: Hachette, 1976). As if to confirm Zemtsov's work, Moscow Radio (30 November 1977) quoted these words of a "big time thief awaiting trial: "Everyone steals but not many get caught, so why should I be the one who gets into trouble?"


20. Ibid., p. 10.


25. Nicholas Eberstadt, op. cit.


29. In fact the Soviet regime has used emigration as a way of expelling potential opposition leaders, e.g., Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Vladimir Bukovsky and Sergei Soldatov. The Poles wanted to expel 4,000 Solidarity activists; see The Times, 4 March 1982, p. 1; Colin Shindler, EXIT VISA: Detente, Human Rights and Jewish Emigration Movement in the USSR (London: Backmans & Turner, 1978).

30. See the Samizdat journal Lych Svabodi [Ray of Freedom], No. 6 p. 10, RFE/RL archives. It was also noticeable that Khlebanov (a Soviet dissident miner) and the Moscow dissidents strongly disagreed about tactics and Khlebanov was asked to leave Sakharov's flat in Moscow.


32. Alexander Yanov, Detente After Brezhnev: The Domestic Roots of Soviet Foreign Policy (University of California: 1978), Institute of International Studies, see pp. 27-42. The potential force of the technocratic manager is described.


34. This figure was given by Bishop Pitirim at a press conference in London in June 1979. Also see Jonathan Steele, "Churches are Seen but not Heard," The Guardian, 20 November 1979; and "The Church in the Soviet Union," an interview with Anatoli Leviit Krasnov, in Russkaya Mysl. 5 December 1974, p. 5.


36. Vladimir Osipov founded the open Russian national opposition journal Veche and openly published eight editions before the KGB infiltrated the editorial team.

37. For a detailed analysis of Ogurtzov's group "The All Russian Christian Union for the Liberation of the People" (Vskhon) see John Dunlop, The, New Russian Revolutionaries (Toronto: Nordland, 1975).

38. Quoted Time, 1 March 1982.

39. V. Sosnora, Litychi Golandits (Possev, 1979); Bela Okhmadulina, Oznop (Possev, 1968); Andrei Bitov, Pushkinstei Dom (Ardis, 1976); and Bynat Okudzhavo, Proza: Poezia (Possev, 1968) and five other editions.

40. Vladimir Soloukhin, Kolokof and Pervaya Porychen Perbaya Porucheniya—two short stories in Grani 118 (Frankfurt/Main: Possev, 1980).


42. During the period between his leaving the KGB and becoming Party Chairman, Yuri Andropov assumed many of the ideological duties previously handled by Suslov. Ominously, the 1982 edition of the Standard Encyclopedia of the Soviet Union omits all criticism of Josef Stalin for his role in the mass purges of the 1930s. Such a revision could only have been made under orders from the Central Committee apparatus. See Globe and Mail, 22 November 1982.
