

Perestroika lost — the tragedy



By Mikhail Gorbachev

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PERESTROIKA, the series of political and economic reforms I undertook in the Soviet Union in 1985, has been the subject of heated debate ever since. Today the controversy has taken on a new urgency — not just because of the 25th anniversary, but also because Russia is again facing the challenge of change. In moments like this, it is appropriate and necessary to look back.

We introduced perestroika because our people and the country's leaders understood that we could no longer continue as we had. The Soviet system, created on the precepts of socialism amid great efforts and sacrifices, had made our country a major power with a strong industrial base. The Soviet Union was strong in emergencies, but in more normal circumstances, our system condemned us to inferiority.

This was clear to me and others of the new generation of leaders, as well as to members of the old guard who cared about the country's future. I recall my conversation with Andrei Gromyko, the foreign minister, a few hours before the plenary meeting of the Central Committee that elected me as the party's new general secretary in March 1985. Gromyko agreed that drastic change was needed, however great the risk.

I am often asked whether my fellow leaders of perestroika and I knew the full scope of what we had to do. The answer is yes and no — not fully and not immediately. What we had to abandon was quite clear: the rigid ideological, political and economic system; the confrontation with much of the rest of the world; and the unbridled arms race. In rejecting all that, we had the full support of the people; those officials who later turned out to be die-hard Stalinists had to keep silent and even acquiesce.

It is much more difficult to answer the follow-up question: What were our goals, what did we want to achieve? We came a long way in a short time — moving from trying to repair the existing system to recognising the need to replace it. Yet I always adhered to my choice of evolutionary change — moving deliberately so that we would not break the backs of the people and the country and would avoid bloodshed.

While the radicals pushed us to move faster, the conservatives stepped on our toes. Both groups must bear most of the blame for what happened afterward. I accept my share of responsibility as well. We, the reformers, made mistakes that cost

us, and our country, dearly.

Our main mistake was acting too late to reform the Communist Party. The party had initiated perestroika, but it soon became a hindrance to our moving forward. The party's top bureaucracy organised the attempted coup in August 1991, which scuttled the reforms.

We also acted too late in reforming the union of the republics, which had come a long way during their common existence. They had become real states, with their own

the shortages of everyday items and the lines for essential goods.

Still, the achievements of perestroika are undeniable. It was the breakthrough to freedom and democracy. Opinion polls today confirm that even those who criticise perestroika and its leaders appreciate the gains it allowed: the rejection of the totalitarian system; freedom of speech, assembly, religion and movement; and political and economic pluralism.

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economies and their own elites. We needed to find a way for them to exist as sovereign states within a decentralised democratic union. In a nationwide referendum of March 1991, more than 70 percent of voters supported the idea of a new union of sovereign republics. But the coup attempt that August, which weakened my position as president, made that prospect impossible. By the end of the year, the Soviet Union no longer existed.

We made other mistakes, too. In the heat of political battles we lost sight of the economy, and people never forgave us for

Russian leaders opted for a more radical version of reform. Their "shock therapy" was much worse than the disease. Many people were plunged into poverty; the income gap grew tremendously. Health, education and culture took heavy blows. Russia began to lose its industrial base, its economy becoming fully dependent on exports of oil and natural gas.

By the turn of the century, the country was half destroyed and we were facing chaos. Democracy was imperilled. President Boris Yeltsin's 1996 re-election and the

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transfer of power to his appointed heir, Vladimir Putin, in 2000 were democratic in form but not in substance. That was when I began to worry about the future of democracy in Russia.

I understood that in a situation where the very existence of the Russian state was at stake, it was not always possible to act "by the book". Decisive, tough measures and even elements of authoritarianism may be needed at such times. That is why I supported the steps taken by Mr Putin during his first term as president. I was not alone — 70 percent to 80 percent of the population supported him in those days.

Nevertheless, stabilising the country cannot be the only or the final goal. Russia needs development and modernisation to become a leader in an interdependent world. Our country has not moved closer to that goal in the past few years, even though for a decade we have benefited from high prices for our main exports, oil and gas. The global crisis has hit Russia harder than many other countries, and we have no one but ourselves to blame.

Russia will progress with confidence only if it follows a democratic path. Recently, there have been a number of setbacks in this regard.

For instance, all major decisions are now taken by the executive branch, with the Parliament rubber-stamping formal approval. The independence of the courts has been thrown into question. We do not have a party system that would enable a real majority to win while also taking the minority opinion into account and allowing an

active opposition. There is a growing feeling that the government is afraid of civil society and would like to control everything.

We've been there, done that. Do we want to go back? I don't think anyone does, including our leaders.

I sense alarm in the words of President Dmitri Medvedev when he wondered, "Should a primitive economy based on raw materials and endemic corruption accompany us into the future?" He has also warned against complacency in a society where the government "is the biggest employer, the biggest publisher, the best producer, its own judiciary and ultimately a nation unto itself."

I agree with the president. I agree with his goal of modernisation. But it will not happen if people are sidelined, if they are just pawns. If the people are to feel and act like citizens, there is only one prescription: democracy, including the rule of law and an open and honest dialogue between the government and the people.

What's holding Russia back is fear. Among both the people and the authorities, there is concern that a new round of modernisation might lead to instability and even chaos. In politics, fear is a bad guide; we must overcome it. Today, Russia has many free, independently minded people who are ready to assume responsibility and uphold democracy. But a great deal depends now on how the government acts.

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