

1985–2015. The Values of Perestroika in the Context of Today's Russia

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Perestroika (1985–1991), the process of political reforms initiated in the second half of the 1980s in the Soviet Union under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, became a watershed event in the late 20th century, which changed the world and our country.

Perestroika was not transplanted from the "outside"; it ripened within Soviet society. The need for change was recognized by a significant part of the political elite, the *intelligentsia* and the more active citizens, tired of the stagnation and gerontocracy in the country's political leadership. By 1985, different strata of Soviet society had not only come to an understanding that the country's course of development had no prospects but had also become convinced that it had to be changed.

Reformers in the Soviet leadership encountered a gradually growing, hidden and open resistance from opponents to the new course. Reformers made mistakes and miscalculations but persisted in their efforts to revitalize the political and public life through glasnost and democratization, to build a rule-of-law-based state, overcome the Stalinist totalitarian legacy, end confrontation with the outside world and the Cold War, and reform the Soviet Union based on a new Union Treaty and through granting different statuses to republics within the Union State.

This policy was ideologically formalized in the concept of "new thinking", which combined a critical analysis of the state of society, the priority of human values and the ability to properly respond to the challenges of the time. "New thinking" was linked to the process of *rethinking the values and purpose of government*.

The realization of the fact that government was just a *means* to provide the environment and conditions for the sustainable development of society, not a sacred *goal* in and of itself, spurred internal political competition domestically and at the same time reduced the level of international confrontation.

In terms of the traditional geopolitical struggle for global leadership, the actions of the Soviet leadership, which consented to the unification of Germany, withdrew troops from the Eastern bloc countries and ceased to interfere in Afghanistan's internal affairs, looked like surrender of the positions previously gained. But in terms of emphasizing universal human values over geopolitical and military victory at any cost, this policy was fundamentally new, really modern, realistic and rational. As a result, when Perestroika started, *the danger of a global nuclear conflict was sharply reduced, freeing up colossal resources that could be used for economic, social and cultural development of the country.* That approach was in contrast with the one observed today, when, as in the times of "High Communism", international relations once again become an arena of confrontation, with unpredictable implications. Today's lack of "new thinking" leads to a new threat to humankind, multiplying political and economic risks. Therefore, in the sphere of international relations, the legacy of Perestroika needs rethinking and rebuilding.

Politically, Perestroika has been defeated, though *its main victory was the fall of the Iron Curtain and the end of the Cold War, and the adoption of democratic values in a substantial part of the territory of the former Soviet Union, and Central and Eastern Europe.*

Perestroika did not envisage a scenario of a collapsing Soviet Union. However, the resistance shown by anti-Perestroika forces culminated in the August 1991 coup, which disrupted the signing process for the new Union Treaty, fueled separatist sentiments of republican political elites, which sought full control over the economic assets of their respective regions, and led to the collapse of the Soviet

Union. Despite having laid the foundations of a modern market economy and the statehood of the Russian Federation, the reforms initiated in the 1990s, in post-Soviet Russia, did not lead to sustainable, long-term positive results and the country's shift to a modern, dynamic model of development:

- Democratic institutions have been discredited in the eyes of a significant part of the Russian population;
- In spite of radical market reforms, a skewed and uncompetitive model took shape, showing heavy reliance on natural resources and curbing economic development;
- A "vertical of power" has been built, with over-centralized public resources and administrative powers;
- Political competition has been virtually eliminated; "prohibitive" barriers have been created to entry into the political market;
- All of the more important mass media have come under state control and are being transformed into tools of official propaganda; public debate has degraded, and the space for civic activism independent of the state has been shrinking continuously;
- Finally, Russia and the West have come dangerously close to the brink of confrontation, with the threat of a new Cold War and the escalation of international conflicts becoming more imminent.

However, Perestroika was not a "false start": the values it proclaimed should be retained, and those who argue that Russian society is not ready for democracy or even "rejects" a democratic path of development should be proved wrong.

Perestroika: An alternative to the state-centric model and chaos

For centuries, the authoritarian state, which was totalitarian in 1930s–1950s, had been the main driving force of Russian history. Perestroika was borne out of a

crisis of Russia's traditional state-centric model, in which the state (government) played a central role in shaping the economic, social and political relations. At the same time, the state as a system of public institutions has failed to take shape in Russia.

There are two important features that have played a decisive role in Russian political history. First, the marriage between power and property ownership, turning power into the main source of personal well-being, which makes corruption a pillar supporting the entire structure and is a powerful obstacle to the emergence of economic or political influence centers independent of the government. Secondly, the subordination of society and the individual to the state as a system of autocratic rule, which seeks to prevent society from gaining autonomy and consistently destroys mechanisms of social integration and self-organization. Moreover, the prevailing view among the elites and wide social strata is that confusion and chaos are perhaps the only alternative to the dominance of the state.

With this approach, the history of Russia has been and is still perceived by many just as a never-ending struggle to choose between two extremes: on the one hand, a centralized despotic state, subjugating society to its all-encompassing power and acting not only as the main driving force of social change but also as a "generator of meanings", and on the other hand, disorder, often escalating into chaos, unrest, and a bloodbath of civil wars.

The Soviet system became the ultimate representation of the state-centric model. The internal erosion of the Soviet ideology and the imminent systemic crisis of the state showed that since at least the second half of the 1970s, the model had exhausted itself. Manageability of social development, which was critical to the success of the state-centric model, was becoming increasingly problematic. By the mid-1980s, this had become an important factor of stagnation and imminent crisis.

Although the war was part of the past, the Soviet government used continuity with the Victory in World War II as a source of own legitimacy and the solemn celebration of the Victory Day was meant to emphasize the absence of war in the present. Meanwhile, the demobilized country continued fighting, sending troops to Afghanistan and getting involved in military conflicts in other parts of the world. Starting from the late 1970s, year after year, the Afghan War had been eating away the resources of the country already weakened by the tragic events of the 20th century.

Disappearing villages in Russia's non-Black Earth belt, increasing levels of alcohol consumption among the population, and chronic shortages in the supply of basic consumer goods had become the realities of the later period Soviet society. By the mid-80s, the Soviet economy had started to show a marked decline in the national income growth rate and, accordingly, in the rates of growth in living standards. In 1983, Member of the Russian Academy of Science Tatyana I. Zaslavskaya wrote that the system of state management of the economy in the USSR, which had taken shape fifty years earlier, "has never been subjected to a thorough re-design to reflect fundamental changes in the state of productive forces."

The Soviet foreign policy had run into a deadlock: the Soviet Union found it increasingly difficult to compete with the West to keep the "socialist camp" countries in its orbit of influence. The possession of nuclear weapons served as a deterrent against foes in international politics; however, continued military competition with the West was becoming increasingly difficult.

In the 20th century, Perestroika became the second major attempt (after the February Revolution of 1917) to take the country away from the trajectory of previous development and overcome its path dependence. The political changes implemented in 1985–1991 on the initiative and under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev – glasnost, and the country's first free and contested election to the supreme governing bodies of the state, which broke the monopoly of the

CPSU, – created conditions and prerequisites for the development of a law-based state and a break with the state-centric model.

Perestroika was aimed at overcoming the totalitarian past and releasing the transformative power of society by turning it into an independent actor in the process of historical change. In other words, Perestroika offered an alternative to both the state-centric tradition and chaos.

Overcoming path dependence

During the Perestroika years, there was little talk about path dependence or some "historical curse" affecting Russia. The transformations that were taking place were seen as a logical step towards modernization that had stalled in the preceding years of "stagnation" and now required "acceleration". From the perspective of Soviet history, Perestroika from the very start was placed alongside the New Economic Policy (NEP) of the 1920s, the Twentieth Communist Party Congress and Khrushchev's "thaw", and Kosygin's reforms of the 1960s. Thus, the entire previous experience of peaceful change in the Soviet Union was seen by the initiators of Perestroika as a foundation for a new but logical stage of accelerated development and improvement of the socialist social system.

At the same time, Perestroika was consonant with those periods in Russian history when society and the government had tried to jointly move towards freedom. The most obvious and common parallel with Perestroika in the Russian pre-revolutionary history are the Great Reforms of the mid-19th century, when serfdom was abolished in Russia, strong and independent courts were introduced, foundations for local self-government (*zemstvo*) were laid, and the word "glasnost" was for the first time introduced into the political lexicon.

Taking over the helm of the country 130 years later, Mikhail Gorbachev offered the generations of descendants of the Russian peasants granted personal freedom under Alexander II to essentially complete the process of emancipation by creating

a modern democratic society. The problem, however, was that there had been no experience of non-authoritarian modernization in either Russian or Soviet history. The gap between the needs of historical development and the lack of social forces that could drive modernization led to the state, the government assuming the role of a change agent. This pattern, which is generally typical of all catch-up modernization efforts, is clearly seen in different periods of Russian history. It was characteristic of the liberal innovations of Alexander I in the early 19th century and the reforms of his grandson, Alexander II, the “Tsar Liberator”, which paved the way for Russia's transition to capitalism, and of Khrushchev's "thaw" of the late 1950s–early 1960s, which dealt the first blow to the political system built by Stalin.

The weakness of the social forces that had a stake in the successful outcome of reform inevitably lead to all attempts at systemic reform in Russia failing to take the reform through to logical completion. The longer the delay with economic reform following the failure of "Kosygin's" attempt in 1965–1968, the higher was the price of possible change with every year, and the higher would be the shock impacts associated with them. The longer the delay with political reform after Khrushchev's attempts in 1962–1964 to draft a new Constitution of the USSR, the more powerful the outburst of mass discontent turned out to be later. So every time when she started a transformation process, Russia did not have enough historical time. The pressure of the problems she had to address almost simultaneously in a historically short period of time eventually outweighed the impetus of reforms, predetermining the country's return to the traditional path of development. However, the unresolved issues and challenges of development, which grew significantly worse and bitter as the reforms unfolded, were eventually used by conservative forces to roll back the transformation process and switch to a policy of counter-reform.

Perestroika also started out as a "revolution from above." And in this sense, it is typologically not different from any previous attempts at systemic change. However, while the previous attempts to overcome the state-centric model of Russia's development had proved unsuccessful due to the fact that the social groups embracing the values of freedom and self-realization were obviously not numerous, the urbanized, educated later period Soviet society was better placed to address the task. On the eve of Perestroika, Soviet society clearly showed huge demand for change. The paradox was that in their desire for change the Soviet people did not know how to implement it, or what needed to be done to do that, or what "price" they would have to pay for it.

The concept and the thrust of reforms make Perestroika similar to revolution. From the very outset, the architects of Perestroika linked it to the rethinking of the legacy of the October Revolution and works by Vladimir Lenin. Neither Gorbachev nor his closest associates questioned the idea of Socialism. Tellingly, the report Gorbachev made to mark the revolution's anniversary in 1987 was titled "October and Perestroika: The revolution goes on."

Contrary to popular belief, Perestroika was not borne out of the struggle for power between two factions within the ruling Communist *nomenklatura*, which had a common goal of preserving the Soviet system but differed over the way to achieve it. According to this view, the conservatives tried to leave everything as it was, while the reformers sought to make the system more flexible through isolated changes. Perestroika's initiators were guided by the desire to put the country onto a different path of development, rather than by the desire to hold on to power at any cost. Therefore, *one of the most important achievements of Perestroika was the institutionalization of elections as a democratic value, a tool to form the government and change it through a free expression of the will by citizens.*

At first, the idea of transformation met no resistance. In the public opinion of the time, the word "conservative", used to denote those rejecting and resisting Perestroika, developed a clearly negative connotation.

Historically, the first public opinion surveys conducted in the late 1980s¹ showed that support for Mikhail Gorbachev at times peaked at 80% +/- 5%. At the same time, the polls suggested that the policies of Perestroika and glasnost had the support of not the entire society, but rather mostly of its more dynamically important part that comprised people below 40 years, with higher or specialized secondary education and residing in major and biggest cities. The above socio-demographic characteristics were "axial", which meant that not all people described by them were supporters of Perestroika. It also meant that other population groups were also among its supporters. It is known that the general support for Perestroika processes even among the "axis" groups was higher than in the north-western regions of the USSR and in Moscow, and lower in southern and eastern parts of the country. In the Baltic republics, the Leningrad Region, and the Moscow region, the number of Perestroika's supporters was higher due to increased support from older generations, including pensioners, who were often even more active than young people.

Thus, Perestroika encouraged vast groups of the population to get involved in the processes of social change. Due to the wide demand for change, it rapidly ceased to be just a "revolution from above." Perestroika period became an era of a great historical shift accompanied with a strong social activism, which implied an overhaul of society's values. A new social order could not be sustained without the adoption of values such as rule-of-law, freedom of choice, personal responsibility, tolerance, guarantees of private property and entrepreneurial rights, without

¹ The All-Union Center for the Study of Public Opinion was launched with the support of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987. Its founders and leaders included Tatyana Zaslavskaya, Boris Grushin, and later Yuri Levada. In 2004, the center's research team had to leave the organisation, operating since then under the brand name of Levada Analytical Center (the Levada-Centre).

separation of powers, an independent judiciary, and free media. In effect, *reception of the values of democracy, the rule of law and responsible (accountable) government* started.

Perestroika became an attempt to answer the fundamental questions that had long been left unanswered in Soviet society – about freedom and its boundaries, about the relationship between the state and the individual, about safeguards of property rights and the right to own property. Launched as a process of liberalization from above, it triggered an array of trends for self-organization and autonomy of society as against the state.

Glasnost, which destroyed the state's ideological monopoly, the growing inefficiencies, confusion, and later, a crisis of power structures prompted society to start rapidly shedding its dilapidated "Soviet" shell. The interests, views, myths and phobias that had prevailed among society started to surface, expressed in increasingly organized forms. Informal movements of the second half of the 1980s were very diverse and emerged from below, from within society, overlapping and interacting, sometimes in quite bizarre ways, and showing ideological or political divisions at the top.

Also emerging was the public sphere, *a space for public dialogue, which was gradually transforming into a space of nascent civil society*. It was a breeding ground for a variety of civic initiatives – from environmental associations and self-government groups to associations in support of glasnost, and defence of human rights and dignity. This showed that society had retained its self-organization potential.

The generation of Soviet people to which Gorbachev and most intellectuals and managers belonged – the "children of the 20th Party Congress", "men and women of the sixties", the generation which showed support for and promoted the policy of Perestroika, felt continuity with those of its predecessors who, while recognizing

the European nature of Russian culture, sought to make Russia a free, prosperous country. *The mission and achievement of Gorbachev and the "generation of the sixties" was that in the late 1980s, Russia had embarked on the path of democratization. Whether she has eventually become free is not the question to be asked of those who opened up a historical alternative for her, but the one to be put to those who entered politics after them, the current government, Russian society and every citizen.*

An unfinished revolution

Perestroika put forward the fundamental question of whether the Soviet system was reformable in the form it had developed over the years of Soviet power. The resistance of the conservative part of the *nomenklatura*, the crisis of power structures, and the conflicting processes taking place in a society that was being emancipated from the yoke of the command administrative system derailed the process of gradual transformation of the Soviet system. Another factor with a decisive impact was the economic crisis, which resulted from both the shriveled resources base of the previous economic model and the inconsistent attempts at its reform, which were not seen through and were based on the outdated stereotypes of economic thinking. In his *Memoirs*, giving an account of the famous April (1985) Plenum of the CPSU, Mikhail Gorbachev wrote: "Looking ahead even then to the development of the social programme for the XXVIIth Party Congress, we wondered whether it was possible simultaneously to modernize industry and to implement important measures in the social sphere? We concluded that this could be done if there was priority development of the production sphere. In other words, our thinking was still in thrall to conventional formulae."

Attempts to maintain stable prices and at the same time make producers more independent were inherently conflicting. And the inclusion of certain elements of new market relations in the old administrative economic system resulted in its unravelling starting from the late 1988, with its economic and financial

components becoming unbalanced, and the external debt, the monetary overhang, and the open and latent inflation growing.

Thus, the path of gradual evolution towards liberalization was blocked for the Soviet economic system.

Perestroika remained an "unfinished revolution"; however, despite the political setback, it was Russia's civilizational success, with a longer term prospect. Historical experience shows that in such cases, many of the things that emerged during the years of systemic change do not disappear completely but in one form or another are adopted in the next era. For example, independent courts and new representative institutions created during the Great Reforms of Alexander II, despite the restrictions of their powers and mandates under Alexander III, continued functioning during the period of counter-reform, setting the stage for future political changes in Russia in the early 20th century. For example, the first Russian revolution of 1905–1907, though defeated, gave rise to a parliamentary system in Russia. Similarly, the values borne out of Perestroika were sustained in the public consciousness and to some extent in the new Russia's political system.

The value of "fair elections" retained its relevance, which should be recognized as an extremely important factor. The emphasis Mikhail Gorbachev and his political allies made on "real" elections of governing bodies and the head of state (as contrasted to "ritual", uncontested elections, as was customary in the Soviet Union) got wide support of citizens. Since then, the practice of pre-election campaigns and elections has undergone a lot of "malignant" changes and distortions, which got reflected in public opinion. Up to a quarter of the population, started to invariably expect any upcoming election to be "dirty". But even this poll finding is indicative of the fact that Russian society still places value on "clean"/fair elections.

The policy of glasnost should be recognized as the most important outcome of Gorbachev's reforms. It involved, above all, transparency and openness as essential

pre-requisites of the freedom of speech and the right to express an opinion different from the official or dominant views. In spite of everything, the public consciousness continued to recognize the legitimacy of opposition and the right of citizens to protest actions by the authorities. Secondly, glasnost meant revealing the truth about reprisals by the Soviet regime. Russian citizens still view it as glasnost's important aspect, despite the growth in recent years in positive assessments of Joseph Stalin's personality and activities.

A detailed analysis of how Russians perceive Perestroika in retrospect, from a historical distance, conducted by the Levada-Center in 2005, showed that *twenty years on, the Russian public opinion considered glasnost, seen as an opportunity to speak out publicly, to be Perestroika's main positive outcome. Freedom to travel abroad took second place. The findings of later polls suggest that this right has retained high importance in people's minds, particularly among young people.*

The legacy we have given up

However, already in the 1990s, the continuity of values with the Perestroika period started to erode. The open, bloody civil conflict in Moscow, in October 1993, the Chechen war, started in 1994, and the surfacing of organized crime and the criminal underworld increased the public's demand for a return to the authoritarian state, which would drive the country into "order". Following the August 1998 default, a large part of society stopped believing in the ability of market forces to create an effective economy and a just social system. Society expressed its willingness to once again fully entrust its future to the state, the authorities – in exchange for a state policy that would guarantee socio-economic stabilization, and, at a later stage, income growth. This shift in public opinion allowed the new ruling strata to create a system that excluded broad democratic participation, while cementing the monopoly-based privileged position of the country's new elites in political system and business. After the security services and the bureaucracy subdued oligarchs in the first half of the 2000s, the old

dilapidated Soviet political institutions have got their "life after death". The reforms were ultimately wound down as the main focus was shifted to the task of maintaining stability, which meant that the new ruling stratum kept a "controlling stake" of the power and property. During the subsequent decade and a half, they were busy successfully taking advantage of the country's natural resources and the state budget, which was formed mostly by revenues from exports of raw materials, rather than by taxes from citizens. Oil revenues enabled the government to pursue a policy of growth and prosperity and stabilize the political system based on state paternalism.

The new ruling strata virtually gave up on the state reform, on the development of strong and sustainable institutions functioning under a rule-of-law framework. The personalistic political regime, and weak and unstable institutions were much more consistent with the needs of the new ruling class than a modern democratic state functioning under intense public oversight. This course of events excluded large groups of the population from participation in transformations and led to the spread of social and political apathy in society.

The fact that reforms were wound down already during Vladimir Putin's first presidential term, which was the main cause of the restoration that started, does not remove the question of why the urbanized and highly educated post-Soviet society so easily agreed with the negative assessment of Perestroika, its values and achievements.

Characteristically, attitudes towards Perestroika are consistently dependent above all on the generation a specific respondent belongs to. For example, the "children of Perestroika" (the generation whose members in 2005 were about the age equal to the number of years that passed since 1985), and "Perestroika's peers" (those who met her at a young age) for the most part share the positive assessment of it. In contrast, many of those who met Perestroika as an adult and survived the collapse of the Soviet system, in particular the Soviet status hierarchy, would like

to turn back the clock. Their demographic and moral pressure on the public opinion in general contributed to society's deep split over Perestroika and the prevalence of negative assessment. A more significant factor contributing to a negative image of Perestroika is, however, the pressure of conservative attitudes proclaimed as an official approach to history in the 2000s and based largely on the perceptions of older, poorly educated, low-income groups of population that rely on the state for everything, including information. These perceptions have had an impact on the views of young people, among whom 40% of those aged 18–24 years and 49% of those aged 25–39 years believe that Perestroika has brought more harm than good.

A change in Russia's foreign policy is one of the more serious outcomes of the revision of Perestroika's gains. As for the reflection of these changes in public opinion, the values of "new thinking" and the idea of joining the "European home" have undergone considerable revision 30 years on since the start of Perestroika. According to the Levada-Center, in February 2015, 44% of respondents believed that "the West was a different civilization, an alien world with its own laws, with other people and relations between them"; 25% agreed that "the West comprised the states and political forces that would always be hostile to our country"; while 19% believed that "the West was a rational, cold world, with formal, selfish relations between humans." Only 8% of respondents agreed with the statement that "the West meant the highest achievements of Western culture - science, philosophy and art," and even less people (6%) believed that "the West was a land of democracy and rule of law, serving as a model of modern development."

Although the later period Soviet society as a whole supported Perestroika, the "revolution of values" within society had just started. It was a difficult process for a longer term, and at the initial stage, it was directly dependent on the success of Perestroika policy. When Perestroika was disrupted in 1991, ushering in the post-Soviet period, the society traumatized by the collapse of the USSR entered it

divided and largely disoriented. The subsequent events only deepened the division over values, as evidenced, among other things, by the Russian Federation's new Constitution of 1993. It provided for monocentric government, thus laying the groundwork for a possible shift to authoritarianism.

The anatomy of the shift

Perestroika took place under the slogan of bringing the country back into the fold to the world civilization, the development trends of which were set by developed countries of the West. In that situation, the majority of society embraced the values of freedom, political democracy, and human rights above all as a tool for rapid achievement of high, "Western" standards of living. However, as economic difficulties mounted in the 1990s, the attractiveness of new values started to fade. In the 2000s, during the sharp oil price rises, when the government got an opportunity to pursue paternalistic policies, a national consensus was formed around the formula of "prosperity growth in exchange for the abandonment of social and political activism." As a result, a large part of society agreed that growth of living standards was achievable in the conditions of unfreedom as well. In that situation, the restoration of authoritarianism became not only possible but gradually gained more and more support.

The fact that 12 years on after the August 1991 coup, public opinion refused to recognize the importance of the Democrats' victory could be seen as a sign of this process. According to the surveys conducted by the Levada-Center in 2013, the responses to the question, "Who do you think now was right in the days of the August coup" found that 11% believed that Yeltsin and the Democrats were right, while 10% believed that members of the State Committee on the State of Emergency were right, and 57% believed that neither side was right (with 22% undecided).

The 2000s saw a dramatic strengthening of the state bureaucracy's positions, with this group becoming one of the biggest influences in modern Russian society. Rising oil prices and a recovery growth during the first decade of the 21st century enabled the government to accumulate huge profits and give up further attempts at social and economic reform of the country to pursue policies that provided for a marked increase in the population incomes – particularly as contrasted to the 1990s.

This resulted in the emergence of a conservative socio-political model, under which almost all main social and political forces were interested in maintaining the status quo. This model, which relied on high oil market prices for its stability, has entered into a crisis when the oil prices went down and the unfolding events in Ukraine have sharply worsened the relations between Russia and the West.

The ruling elites proved unable in the changed circumstances to propose a new strategy for the country's development. At the same time, they focused on ensuring the inviolability of their monopoly on power and property by any means, including repression.

In this context, *the process of abandoning the institutions, values and procedures introduced by Perestroika was intensified*. In the new situation, the principles of competition, openness, tolerance, separation of powers and free choice undermine the conservative status quo by the very fact of their existence. Therefore, they are being deliberately replaced by bureaucratic centralization and control, which spread to increasingly more spheres of life. The "besieged fortress" mentality and the related intolerance to other opinions, as well as the phobia against the West are getting wide support in the mass consciousness.

These changes also became possible because a large part of the population is still completely dependent on the state, fearing possible changes, the outcomes of which look uncertain to them. Therefore, they perceive the expanding state control

over society and the economy as a more reliable protection against impending problems.

There is no doubt that the persistence of these trends in the coming years will continue driving the drift toward statism and isolationism, which in the era of globalization would result in Russia chronically lagging behind. The logic of the processes that started will push the country in this direction, sometimes perhaps even contrary to the intentions of its leadership. In such circumstances, revisiting the values of Perestroika is not a historical journey but a search for a strategy that would restore to the country the democratic alternative it has lost.

Understanding Perestroika: Why is it important now?

Today, 30 years on since 1985, a significant part of society continues to share the values introduced during the Perestroika period. According to the surveys conducted by the Levada-Center already in 2015, 58% of respondents believe that today's Russia needs a political opposition, with 54% viewing street rallies and demonstrations as a normal democratic means for citizens to express their views. Finally, it is very important to note that in 2014, 23% of respondents answered positively to the first part of the question: "Do you think that the policy of Perestroika declared in 1985 brought Russia more good or more harm overall?"

Understanding the era of Perestroika and its lessons is critical for today's Russia and, most importantly, for formulating strategic objectives for the coming years and decades.

The experience of Perestroika, its achievements, and its political failure prove that democracy is not only the will of the majority but consistent rules, institutions, and procedures. *Any attempt to ignore the rules, institutions, and procedures that are based on democratic values would lead in the longer term to a profound destabilization of the system.*

Modern society can only effectively exist and evolve only when a broad social consensus based on democratic values is reached. Any attempt to divide people into the right and wrong, “us and them”, the majority and renegades, leads not just to a split but in fact to a civil war. The alternative to it is a social system in which different groups/elites do not alternate in suppressing one another but maintain the balance, a political compromise. The attempts of Russian society to embark on this path have not so far been too successful.

Perestroika has also clearly revealed *the extreme danger posed by radical nationalism and related ethnic conflicts*. At the same time, it was Perestroika that opened up an opportunity for transition to a semi-presidential republic, the most suitable system for Russia, with its ethnic and cultural diversity of forms of political order.

The experience of Perestroika shows the need for open and free public discussion of the more pressing issues. The existence of areas closed to debate leads to distrust, and distrust breeds conflicts, which brew for the years but break out in a matter of days or even hours. It is time to understand that censorship and areas closed to debate can not protect us from problems, while the lack of timely information about the existence of a certain problem usually has very sad consequences. Therefore, *the policy of glasnost remains to be one of the most important values of Perestroika and its relevant legacy*.

One of Perestroika's recognized achievements, *the concept of "new thinking"*, proceeds from the premise that *Russia should not wage wars against the outside world*. She should treat countries both in the West and in the East only as partners, relations with whom are built on the principles of openness, good neighborliness, equality, respect for mutual interests, and cooperation. Russia should remain committed to peaceful settlement of any conflicts, non-use of nuclear weapons and general disarmament, and dialogue and trust between different countries and

peoples within the frameworks of international institutions and based on international law.

Today, it is obvious that Perestroika should be seen as a crucial stage in the history of transformations of Russian society and the Russian state. In political terms, Perestroika's agenda was not delivered, which was largely why Russia has entered the 21st century with the same range of problems she had had when the Perestroika cycle started back in the mid-1980s. It means that a new phase of profound democratic reforms is inevitable, prompted by the same problems that have triggered the renewal processes in the Perestroika period: inefficient and obsolete political model; economic and technological backwardness; archaic methods of interaction between the state and society; dangerously high levels of international confrontation, etc. Therefore, a number of political ideas put forward by Perestroika remain relevant *from a practical perspective*:

- free elections;
- federalism;
- rule of law;
- social democracy, providing all citizens with an access to the achievements of modern civilization;
- self-organization of society.

Today, the debate on Perestroika is taking on a new dimension: a discussion of the causes and consequences of what happened to us and our country evolves into a drive to explore the lessons of Perestroika, its achievements and failures in search for answers to the questions about a modern strategy for Russia and the country's future. However, regardless of when a new phase of social transformations begins, the experience of Perestroika, its ideas and values will be inevitably revisited.