

THE PARADOXICAL POLICY OF USSR MEDIA CONTROLS AFTER 1985 AND 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. Therefore, the influence of this new policy on the economic crisis of the Former Union was increasing. The development of the media and the warm reception of foreign media in the territory of the USSR accelerated these processes.

Keywords: 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

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

lure one in. It is also in this context that the rise to power of Gorbachev can be analyzed. Like Shane explains, In a 1983 analysis with Gorbachev and two other Politburo ministers, they made the economic crisis in the USSR very clear. They did not, however, share this information with Yuri Andropov. Because Vladimir Dolgikh, the Minister of Heavy Industry, and Nikolai Ryzhkov, the Chief Economist of the Economic Committee, used their positions to conceal this information. As a result, the budget's attention remained on military technology. They continued to support Gorbachev after the death of Yuri Andropov in 1984. And it was because of them that he rose to power. The phase had also been accelerated by their 20-year long relationship. Given that Gorbachev rose through the ranks of the regime, he was well aware of the Politburo's, Communist Party's, and Soviet power structure's influence. After 1985, these three officials were the most powerful figures in the entire system. They also had complete control over the Soviet power structure, the Planned Economy, and the Politburo.⁴ Gorbachev must have known very well that information was the driving force behind the whole Soviet system because he himself had become the leader of the USSR as a result of concealing and manipulating information. Because Gorbachev had worked in a Soviet Union, with 12 time zones, 110 official ethnicities, and a population of 287 million, he understood how important information was for control. He also, however, believed it would be risky for the Soviet power structure to retain ownership over the flow of information once he came to power. In response, the Soviet power structure started to make significant changes, paradoxically arguing that complete control of information would cause the economy to collapse.⁵ The Soviet government found itself in an unusual political situation as a result of the political reforms unleashed by Gorbachev in 1985. One aim of Gorbachev's relentless coverage of his new *perestroika* policy was in fact ending the Soviet power structure's monopoly on information, and with it presumably their control over politics. The Cold War press was taken aback by this change of heart. For example, Soviet press started talking about Russian artists who had been censored in the last century, and works of Russian authors from 1787-1917 were reinterpreted as a means to preserve Russian culture.¹⁰⁵ The media could criticize Lenin and his shortcomings on a whole new level. For the Soviet media a new age had already started. As soon as *Glasnost* started in 1987, media outlets were further liberated from the shackles of Soviet power structure censorship. The press's role in criticizing government policy was now starting to take center place.⁶

⁴ G. V. Arxangelskiy. N. S. Leskov. О проблемах здравоохранения (к 150-летию со дня рождения писателя). (About healthcare problems (to the 150th anniversary of the writer's birth)). UDK 614.2: 82 «Leskov» 1987. Note: This source published during the Glasnost era and there had been more than 200 Russian writers between 1787-1917 years whose works were censored by the Communist Parties after the 1923.

⁵ I. Florov. Перестройка И судьба культуры. Предстартовые встречи "Правды" в редакции. (Perestroika And the fate of culture/ "Pravda" pre-star meetings in the editorial office). Pravda 1990, June 24. P. 4. Note: The conference was also attended by other editors from the daily press. The issue of government censorship and press freedom was examined. It was also agreed that the government's incorrect decisions would be criticized at all times.

⁶ Ingram. A. 'A Nation Split into Fragments': The Congress of Russian Communities and Russian Nationalist Ideology.' *Europe-Asia Studies*, 1991, 51 (4), pp. 687-704.

Many news outlets considered the advent of Gorbachev 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.⁷ Disarmament and the reduction of short-range missiles might be in the spotlight as an important topic in international life, but not in everyday life. In this context, Western media, especially the Voice of America, focused on this trend and aggressively covered international politics. Interestingly, the Communist Party's "Ideological Affairs Department (GlavLitKom)" also began to take note of the fact that the Western press was publishing dissenting views in Soviet newspapers because the USSR's foreign policy was positively received in the international arena, but not at home.⁸ The Soviet position was under constant attack by the Voice of America, who critically appraised the social and economic situation in the countries of the Communist Bloc. Following Gorbachev's speech however, Western media outlets started to modify their programming as it became apparent that the political climate would enable them to cover more diverse issues without alienating their audience.⁹

The Russian-language news agency TASS was especially supportive of Gorbachev's speech.¹⁰ In my analysis of a certain part of the Pravda's archives newspaper, it was shown that very few articles were published about the Voice of America between 1950 and 1980.¹¹ However, as the main - and constant - source of US propaganda, the VOA had been able to achieve a change in social consciousness during the economic hardships of the 1980s as well as a modification of Soviet policy.¹² This would prove itself, especially in Eastern Europe. The reality was that there had been multiple instances of immanent collapse for the USSR after 1985, and that coincided with a period of relative free of speech and sparkling new ideas.¹³

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 media was still under regulation, their regulation.¹⁴ 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

⁷ Scott Shane. Dismantling Utopia. The end of the USSR. 1995, pp, 205-225.

⁸ TASS, *Добрая воля СССР* (The USSR's goodwill). Pravda, April 9, 1985.111)Pravda digital archives between 1950-1991. <https://dlib.eastview.com>

⁹ Sobraniye Pravda 11 aprelya, *Важный конструктивный шаг. Новые советские предложения в центре внимания мирового сообщества* (An important constructive step. New Soviet proposals are in the center of attention of the world community). Pravda 1987 April 12. P, 4

¹⁰ Sergey Shakhrai, 'Советские эксперты Уйти, чтобы остаться? [Soviet Experts. Leave to stay?]' republished article of Pravda "1991 September 5, page 4" by *Rossiyskiya Gazeta*, December 20, 2006, No. 286, p. 19. Note: Sergei analyzed article of 'Sovet Eksportov' and republished 'Уйти, чтобы остаться?' he concluded mistakes of Perestroika.

¹¹ N.Larionova, *Нет, не фантастика. Провокация!* (No, not Fantastic. Provocation!). Pravda 1989, February 1. P, 4

¹² Alexander Dallin, "Causes of the Collapse of the USSR," *Post-Soviet Affairs*. October-December 1992, pp. 279-302; Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 160-187.

¹³ Scott Shane. Dismantling Utopia. The end of the USSR. 1995, pp, 99-121

¹⁴ Ibid. pp, 245-276

since Stalin that had allowed the Soviet power structure to strengthen its stranglehold over the USSR.¹⁵ However, since the Soviet power structure losely 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.¹⁶ The Soviet power structure, which had previously been in charge of preparing all speeches for Communist Party members, was now entrusted with preparing speeches for him only. This policy, however, was not well understood by the people in the early Gorbachev years.¹⁷ That is why the attention of most historians focused on his international policy, especially the relations between the United States and the Soviet Union.¹⁸ Because of Gorbachev's offensive against the Soviet power structure, relations between the United States and the Soviet Union started to receive widespread coverage in the Soviet media since Gorbachev broke with all previous policy by proclaiming the United States to be "a close ally and partner of the Soviet Union."¹⁹ The Soviet propaganda machine had to now operate backwards, which gave the Soviet power structure ample distraction from internal Soviet politics.

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.²⁰ 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.²¹ The article not only included a comprehensive report on the reform program's ineffectiveness but also urged the government to modify it. Although these

¹⁵ Shane 1995. Pp, 99-121

¹⁶ Jack F. Matlock, Jr., *Reagan and Gorbachev: Ending the Cold War*. New York: Random House, 2004, pp. 24-36.

¹⁷ ГоскомСтата Собрания, 'Ускорить здоровую экономику Социально-экономическое развитие СССР в 1989 г. [Speed up healthy economy Social and economic development of the USSR in 1989]', *Pravda*, 1990 January 28, pp.1-2

¹⁸ Цветкова Наталья Александровна *Публичная дипломатия как инструмент идеологического и политического экспансии США в мире, 1914–2014 гг.* Moscow, St. Peterburg university press 2016, pp 322-345.

¹⁹ TASS. Перестройка: нам нужно чем заняться *Perestroika: we need things to do*). *Pravda* 1990 April 21 . pp.1-4. See Robert A. Dahl, "Why All Democratic Countries Have Mixed Economies," in John W. Chapman and Ian Shapiro, eds., *Democratic Community*. New York: Random House 1993, pp. 46-62.

²⁰ 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

²¹ 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

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.²² 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 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.²³

The media evolved dramatically during the Reagan administration, according to a study by Ch T. Salmon. Reagan's presidency, Salmon noted, was also remembered for its quick response to media criticism. As a result, US media strategy had gained clout on the worldwide stage. This was also partially because such remarks served as a powerful example of free speech. The terms "Reagan model of the press" has also been used. The press had been covering Ronald Reagan's presidency relentlessly, but Reagan became quite effective in handling the press after adopting Q&A style briefings.²⁴

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.²⁵ Gorbachev, on the other hand, only tried to enact reform by changing the *political* system of the USSR, and not its foundations.

²² Горбачев в редакции «Правды» (M. S. Gorbachev as amended by Pravda). Pravda 1989. Page 1 October 24,

²³ 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

²⁴ Scott Shane. Dismantling Utopia. The end of the USSR. 1995, pp, 99-121

²⁵ Ibid, pp 451-462

The most important interview with Gorbachev that highlights this point of view was his response to "Publishing of political literature of the Central Committee of the CPSU (politizdat)" in 1988. According to Gorbachev, "the Soviet Union now has 2.5 million propagandists and volunteers, roughly equal to the number of public-school teachers in the United States."²⁶ In other words, he intended to draw the nation's attention to himself and portray himself as a national hero. Gorbachev began his first reforms while criticizing the media because he knew well the power the press could wield. Firstly, he called a large meeting of the editors-in-chief of all Pravda publications.²⁷ This meeting was noteworthy because it was the first time a Communist Party secretary had ever attended such an event.²⁸ The reason no other secretary had convened this kind of meetings lay in the fact that there was no need for it since the whole press was under Soviet power structure control already. Gorbachev was also reported to be very involved in the management of the Pravda, according to articles in a special issue.²⁹ After his visit, almost all of Gorbachev's media reforms accelerated. Journalists were encouraged to spread news about *Perestroika* and ensure that its idea reached everybody. However, Soviet power structure regulations remained in place, as Gorbachev believed that the continuing censorship was preventing him from doing so, but that didn't work either. Next, Gorbachev started replacing the editors-in-chief of all newspapers. Even TASS and Pravda's editors-in-chief were removed.³⁰ Leaders in a communist system would normally be redirected to another position, with the person in the less prestigious position being 'dismissed' as reward, and the other one 'fired' as punishment. Gorbachev, on the other hand, preferred a third way, which was to alter the function of the editors-in-chief themselves. He wanted to set an example by setting *Perestroika* apart from the newly formed internal system (Stalin's typical Communist regime had already established a five-year state plan in 1933, which lasted until 1985).³¹ 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,³² 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.³³

²⁶ 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

²⁷ *Ibid.* p 4. Note: Even this article were special issue. Because Gorbachev came to Pravda studio without planned.

²⁸ Scott Shane 1995. Pp, 212-245

²⁹ Scott Shane. *Dismantling Utopia. The end of the USSR.* 1995, pp, 99-121

³⁰ 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

³¹ A. Романов, Сталинский план реконструкции столицы (Stalin's plan for the reconstruction of the capital). *Moskovskaya Pravda* 2001 November 09. P, 4

³² Michael Kort, *A Brief History of Russia.* Boston University. Pp, 152-194

³³ Peter Kenez. *A History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to the End.* University of California, Santa Cruz. Cambridge University Press. 1999, 2006.

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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