

Conference Paper

The Revolutions of 1989–90: Politological Analysis

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Abstract

Perestroika began in the USSR in June and July of 1988 on the occasion of the debate and approval of a resolution by the nineteenth party conference of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Perestroika ended with the breakup of the USSR in December of 1991. Within this period of history the fundamental revolutionary events in the European nations of the "socialist commonwealth" took place. The year of 1989 will be considered pivotal, representing the transitional stage within the dates cited. This time frame, during which the revolutionary changes were taking place in Eastern Europe, coincides precisely with the period when analogous upheavals were taking place in the Soviet Union. It is apparent that the links between the given events were of a causal nature: After becoming aware of the principles of political renewal issuing from the USSR, the countries in question were able to contemplate various ways of resolving the issue of monopolistic communistic parties. In turn many of these options were adopted in the USSR. Ultimately all members of the "socialist commonwealth" in Europe underwent a process of transformation, even including the breakup of former federative systems contained within them.

Keywords: political reforms, reciprocity, "socialist commonwealth", politological science, institutional structures.

The article represent an attempt to provide an answer to a two-part question. Did Soviet perestroika stir revolutionary tendencies in the nations of the "Eastern bloc" at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s and to what extent did the intensity of these tendencies lead to the upheavals in the USSR? How did the interaction between these two phenomena 20 years ago result in the profound change in the political map of Europe?

Before answering this question a frame of reference must be established. Perestroika as it is commonly understood began in the USSR in June and July of 1988 on the

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occasion of the debate and approval of a resolution by the nineteenth party conference of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Perestroika ended with the breakup of the USSR in December of 1991. Within this period of history the fundamental revolutionary events in the European nations of the “socialist commonwealth” took place. The year of 1989 will be considered pivotal, representing the transitional stage within the dates cited. This time frame, during which the revolutionary changes were taking place in Eastern Europe, coincides precisely with the period when analogous upheavals were taking place in the Soviet Union, as it were—to borrow a metaphor—a smaller doll in a larger set of nesting (*matryoshka*) dolls.

Looking back it is clear that just as the processes of perestroika drove the revolutionary changes in the socialist countries of Eastern Europe, at the same time these changes were having an influence on the character of the processes taking place in the birthplace of perestroika: namely, a situation of mutual conditionality. Hence the entire process of transition that was transpiring in the vast distance from Berlin to Vladivostok can be considered one of cause and effect (It should be noted that the Russian expression used here for cause and effect, or causality, is “reciprocity” (*retsiproknost'*), a term rarely applied in Russian historiography and almost never used in Russian politological science).

Therefore the concept of cause and effect is essential to more accurately determine the direction and fundamental nature of the factors—with the support of extant data—involved in the revolutions referred to above throughout the nations of the “Eastern bloc” or of the “socialist commonwealth” (in Soviet parlance, part of the “international socialist system” to which, as is generally known, belonged nations of Asia and the Americas).

It is important to place the parameters of the causality in question in a historical context. Although it may be difficult to posit one universal unambiguous description of these factors, one can reasonably assume two key elements: removal of the monopoly of one party, or transformation (both as a process and as an end result) of governmental and state structures, whereby the most radical of these took place in the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia.

An important incentive for the upheavals in the socialist-communist European nations came with the resolution of the first congress of the people’s deputies of the USSR on 25 May 1989. This congress largely represented a continuation of the policies formulated at the aforementioned nineteenth party conference one year earlier. It was at this congress in May that irrevocable reforms of the political system of the USSR were acknowledged to be inevitable. In the course of executing these reforms,

institutional structures opposed to the status quo were formed, leading ultimately to the dismantling of the leadership of the USSR.

At about this time—beginning in spring of 1989—in the nations of the “socialist commonwealth” internal opposition within the governing party as in Hungary, as well as external opposition as in Poland was forming with the intention of grasping significant power in the governments of the time. At the same time the oppositional forces that were forming in the USSR were being influenced by the efforts of its neighbors. What is more, a part of the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union—most notably its leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev—was in agreement with these reform movements, albeit unaware of the potential consequences.

Clearly, the countenance of these political reforms (the frigid Kremlin winds were rapidly subsiding) was ample evidence of a further sharp intensification of the activities of the oppositional forces in the socialist nations of Europe. Which, in turn, is renewed evidence of the causality of the dynamics involved in the evolving processes in all European nations of the “socialist commonwealth” and of the clear direction they were taking.

In June of 1989, as a result of the round table talks having begun in April, elections under new precepts took place in Poland bringing about the victory of “Solidarity.” These elections were virtually the origin of a wave of fundamental transformations in the countries of the region, basically proceeding from north to south. The forms these transformations assumed were different but there was no question about their direction.

In Hungary from 22 March to 18 September rounds of talks between the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party and a united opposition determined means for reforming state authority. Pro-Soviet powers resigned and on 23 October the Hungarian People’s Republic was renamed the Republic of Hungary, just as the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party became the Hungarian Socialist Party with a clearly delineated social democratic agenda. (The elimination of the modifiers “workers’” and “people’s” is truly remarkable and it could not be said that it went unnoticed by a significant segment of the population. Similar processes were taking place in the parties and regimes in many other countries of the region.)

On 9 November the Berlin Wall was breached and with it collapsed the power structure of the German Democratic Republic. In less than a year, on 3 October 1990 the two Germanies were united. It should be noted that the complex issue of the transformation of the GDR up to the immediate present has lost its focus as an object of research, at least among Russian experts: The dominating postulate of the inevitability

of a reunion with the Federal Republic of Germany obscures many issues and gives rise to contradictions. For instance, the claims by Western participants in discussions of the German Question that there would be a transformation of the Warsaw Pact and NATO after German reunification have been completely ignored.

A similar position was taken, in fact, by Václav Havel, speaking during talks with Gorbachev on 26 February 1990, in Moscow:

It is imperative to eliminate the schism in Europe and embrace a new security plan that will replace the present mutually competing structures, even if it requires finding successors to the Warsaw Pact and NATO [...] This is the only basis for dealing with the fate of the Warsaw Pact. The Warsaw Pact and NATO as military alliances shall become political affiliations and ultimately represent one system of general European security. In a word it is necessary to finally call an end to the Second World War and eliminate the situation in which Europe became a powerful arsenal of modern weaponry. This would be a victory for peace, not a setback for the USA or the USSR [1, 66].

On 17 November 1989 the “Velvet Revolution” in Czechoslovakia, the course and outcomes of which have been illuminated with all due comprehensiveness began with powerful student demonstrations. The English historian Timothy Garton Ash referred to the “Velvet Revolution” as a “peaceful, theatrical, negotiated regime change in a small Central European state,” the term itself having been introduced by his Western colleagues. This was only to have the term taken over by Vaclav Havel and the oppositional Slovak leaders using the almost identical term “gentle.” [2]. The term “Velvet Revolution” today is taken in a very literal sense, referring to the ten-day events in November 1989 in the former Czechoslovakia, but it is possible to use the term in a broader context characterizing the changes occurring within the year 1989 in the rest of the nations of the East European region ultimately defining Central Europe (The term “Central Europe” derives from the historical geographical metaphor relating to the status of a geopolitical perception; this perception encompasses a range of nations stretching from the Baltic to the Adriatic Sea sharing similar historical characteristics and a convergence of common perspectives. The Central European region during the last decade of the 20th century more or less corresponded to a geopolitical profile consisting of the western European region, and the states of the Commonwealth of Independent States (the former USSR), or simply Eastern Europe. In the course of forming these boundaries a new regional identity gradually emerged under the presumption that there is “a consciousness of belonging to a recognized entity as well

as a similarity of common goals that form the basis of this identity of peoples and governments" [3, 3-27; 4, 140-162; 5, 104-124; 6, 33-52; 7; 8, 65-69].).

In Bulgaria in November of the same year in the plenum of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party the process of removing Todor Zhivkov from all of his posts and eventually ousting him began. On 18 November in the center of Sofia a one-hundred-thousand strong demonstration of the opposition took place after which the largest part of pre-World War II political parties were reestablished.

On 22 December 1989 the insurgent populace in Romania toppled the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu, however this time not without bloodshed. A party belonging to the Front for National Liberation advanced to power and as of 29 December the Socialist Republic of Romania became simply Romania. The leaders of Romania were not able to avoid bloodletting. Moreover, in accordance with the last proclamation of the leader of the National Liberation Front at the time, ex-communist Ion Iliescu, it was unavoidable "to institute an emergency revolutionary court to try the Ceaușescu spouses. And, in fact, as soon as the death sentence was executed on 25 December guns fell silent" [9]. According to their own statement the United States declared that "they had no opposition to a military intervention on the part of the USSR to restore order in Romania" and to support pro-democracy forces in their struggle against troops loyal to Ceaușescu. As for the USSR it adhered to its principal doctrine of not interfering in the affairs of a socialist nation [10].

Finally, beginning in spring of 1990 communists suffered continuing losses at the polls in the republics of Yugoslavia, whereby here to a lesser extent there were similar waves of insurgency from north to south, from Slovenia and Croatia to Serbia and Macedonia.

An analysis of the progress of events in all of these countries is replete with speculation and imponderables. Who of the residents of Prague was the first to draw a bunch of keys of his pocket and rattle them so loudly that his gesture caught the attention of more than 300,000 denizens of the city? Whose actions finally led to the shots in Bucharest? How was it possible to escape the seemingly inevitable bloody confrontations with law enforcement in Leipzig in October 1989 and in Berlin in November?

Looking from "below" reveals a similar succession of riddles. The view from "above" on the other hand only leads to more ambiguity. Both perspectives some twenty years down the road can yield insights only on the basis of a reciprocal view of the events, that is, when in a general sense the events are seen not only on the basis of protocols of the political parties, of the governments or of the opposition, but also by means of other sources of information such as videos or accounts of participant observation.

It must be emphasized that the phenomenon of the removal from power of monopolistic communist parties came about in the various countries by different means: 1) in the course of a dialog of the parties with the new political forces in Poland and Czechoslovakia and to a lesser extent in Bulgaria; 2) in the course of different leanings within the party itself resulting in fractions that formed opposition parties as in Hungary; 3) in the course of general disaffection with the party as in Yugoslavia or, finally, the active overthrow of party authority as in Romania and to a lesser extent in the GDR.

In general—presuming the principle of causality—the following postulate obtains: after accommodating the principles of political renewal issuing from the USSR, the countries in question were able to contemplate various ways of resolving the issue of monopolistic communist parties—both at home and in the USSR. In effect this is how the process of reform proceeded under perestroika in the country where it was born.

Thus in many essential ways the change in the position of the Communist party of the Soviet Union and the amendment to the sixth article of the constitution of the USSR at the third congress of the people's deputies in March of 1990 came about in at least one respect as a reaction to similar developments in the different countries of Central Europe. On the other hand it cannot be ignored that the demise of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was a result of powerful forces from within and was not patterned according to any of the courses of action taken in countries of the region to liquidate the monopoly of one party. In fact, the party gave up a significant part of its legitimacy to the Supreme Soviet by amending the corresponding section of the constitution of the USSR, which greatly weakened the position of the party.

This decision in turn hastened the constitutional reforms in the Central European countries, each in its own way introducing new laws to reform governmental structures.

In August 1991 an attempted return to the pre-perestroika power structures in the USSR ended in failure. By this time all of the former socialist countries west of Brest had divested themselves of the socialist moniker—and applying the principle of causality for fundamental political reforms—had rendered the liquidation of party monopoly a moot point.

Already in the course of manifestations of change a new phenomenon was emerging—the radical reform of state structures, including the downfall of socialist federations. It should be acknowledged that the many crises and the ultimate collapse of socialism were accompanied by a number of critical ethnic conflicts. The severe consequences of the first of these conflicts became evident in their impact on the

federal structures of Yugoslavia, which in a larger sense was the weakest link in the structures of the “socialist commonwealth.” As the independence movements in the various republics making up Yugoslavia with their nationalist forces were pursuing their agendas, the republican communist parties progressively distanced themselves from the League of Communists of Yugoslavia. At the same time in Serbia forces of aggressive nationalism were forming under the banner of an “anti-bureaucratic revolution” (remarkably similar to a campaign underway in the USSR) with the intent of rescinding the autonomy of not only of Kosovo and Vojvodina at the end of 1988 but even of the republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Disintegrative processes in the USSR proceeded almost simultaneously: Among them at the end of 1988 was the People’s Front in the Baltic states that began to raise the issue of independence for Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia from the USSR, and on 9 April, 1989 the People’s Front of Georgia organized a mass demonstration that was broken up with military force. Earlier bloody skirmishes took place within individual republics (Fergana) and between them (Karabakh) but it was possible to subdue them.

These kinds of conflicts were instigated by those party structures that were capable of maintaining them. As a result a “parade of sovereignty” began. At the beginning of September 1991 the USSR recognized the independence of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, and on 8 December the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, Boris Yeltsin, Leonid Kravchuk, and Stanislav Shushkevich, signed the Belavezha accords which declared the USSR dissolved and in its place established the Commonwealth of Independent States. Just as it was with the ethnic conflicts, the constitutional reforms can be seen in the light of the causal links between events in the USSR and the countries of Central Europe.

Regarding a more fortunate outcome, namely, of the two federal socialistic republics of Czechoslovakia, the years 1988 to 1989 saw the beginning of similar processes of secession, albeit as a result of a complex process of diverse breakups both within the federal party structure and the opposition movement.

In January 1990 the fourteenth extraordinary congress of the League of Yugoslavian Communists took place, which also turned out to be its last. The Slovene delegation, followed by the Croatian, left the congress because their call for a reorganization of the party on the basis of a confederation had been denied. This event in Yugoslavia was the first incidence (more accurately it could be said after 3 October 1990—the period of an agreement to unify Germany) of a process of disintegration in an expanse reaching from Berlin to Vladivostok. It soon became clear that this was only the first step on the path to the breakup of the federal state, whereby ethnic factors were not only

a part of the agreements but hastened them. On 2 July 1990 the Slovenian Republic declared its independence, and on 23 December 1990 88.5 percent of the populace voted for separation from Yugoslavia whereupon on 12 June 1991 the state assembly declared its independence as a sovereign state. Shortly after that Croatia followed. On 17 November 1991, Macedonia adapted a constitution declaring full independence. On 6 April 1992, the independence of Bosnia and Herzegovina was adopted, and on 27 April 1992, Serbia and Montenegro declared their continuity with the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and founded the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

All of these processes were accompanied by declarations of the international community of nations demanding or declining to acknowledge these states (including the declaration of independence by Kosovo in this century). Understanding the evolution of these five national entities is a daunting task. In appreciating the present situation it might be fitting to recall that there will always be forces for which it is useful to place one or more pots of boiling bullion on the burner of a stove in southern Europe only to spill it on the feet of neighbors near and far at the most inopportune moment [11].

The independence of these and subsequent other states on the territory of Yugoslavia was generally sanctioned by practically all countries of Europe (including those where the opposite took place—the unification of the two Germanies on 3 October 1990—on the basis of appeals to ethnic consolidation).

The algorithms of the breakup of these socialistic federations took on the following pattern: The emergence and the rapid escalation of ethnic movements—developing within ruling parties with a nationalist tendency—focused on their “own” federal republics and the formation of a union or federation. The progression of events made it apparent that what at first seemed secondary (a postulate of “all or nothing” of the cultural autonomy of ethnic groups in Yugoslavia, of demagogical claims to inflated “investments” in this or the other federal republic, just as it was with similar conflicts in the USSR—not to mention the “battle of the hyphen” in Czecho-Slovakia) emerged as a first priority in the context of the rapidly spreading turmoil.

The next stage of events in the posited algorithm took place in the USSR, whereby the application of the concept of causality, of cause and effect, is obvious. In truth, the experience of Yugoslavia in whatever form, direct or indirect, has become self-evident—and it was characterized by bloody military conflicts, ethnic cleansing, efforts to erect totalitarian regimes and the creation of unrecognized republics.

This phenomenon was taken into account with the aim of avoiding bloody conflicts on the territory of the former USSR—an aim that was not reached entirely. In many ways these conflicts were akin to a smoldering peat bog: Flames are not visible on

the surface but sudden flashes appear unpredictably at completely different places. Monitoring the course of these events and evaluating the data in the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States is a much more difficult task than keeping track of the situation in the countries (republics) of the former Yugoslavia, where many phenomena can be ascribed to the scheming of “alien influences. How did all of this break out under the prevailing conditions in the USSR from 1989 to August of 1991? What is perplexing is that conflicts emerged of unpredictable intensity. The ethnic massacres of Azeris against Armenians in Sumgait in February 1988 and of Uzbeks against Meskhetian Turks in Fergana in June 1989 and demonstrated that fierce outbursts of national protests cannot be predicted, nor are they subject to any forms of regulation. At exactly the same time processes of sweeping government reform were intensifying in the Baltic republics.

In the given context it can be shown that the ethnic conflicts and the resulting destruction of established borders between republics and even within republics following the pattern of the disintegration algorithm each had their own unique dynamics. Even in the apparently analogous situations they cannot serve as a model. In Yugoslavia forces emerged that were focused on maximal exploitation of the breakup of the government. In the USSR the crumbling of the government was accepted as a matter of course, however high the price.

Regarding Czechoslovakia, the “velvet” algorithm of the breakup of the country was essentially the result of confrontational and manipulative actions on the part of a political elite of Czechs and Slovaks rather than an expression of the reformative will of two nations. Even if the situation in Yugoslavia proceeded in a somewhat different direction it still affected the chain of events in the USSR, and the example of these two countries directly determined the character of many manifestations of the algorithm illustrating the breakup of Czechoslovakia. In an attempt to avoid as far as possible unnecessary conflict, almost no blood was shed in an area stretching from Prague to Vladivostok as this third socialist federation was breaking up. In general it could be said that the circumstances of the breakup of the USSR represent a kind of halfway point between the circumstances prevailing in Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. The breakup of these three federations is testimony to the shared human desire of a people to actively form their own unique states—a desire that can only be thwarted by the formation of larger political entities. At least in the European Union it is somewhat easier to resist the demands of extremists.

If an attempt is made to formulate two parameters of the causality referenced at the outset of these remarks the following picture emerges: In north-central Europe

revolutionary processes usually took place against a backdrop of negotiations avoiding bloodshed. In the southern parts of the region it was necessary to resort to great force to achieve overthrow of a government. In the course of the sweeping changes in the USSR the picture was similar: During the course of reform processes, negotiations were more actively pursued in the north than in the south.

There used to be a popularly held notion of wave of stability on the European continent [12]. In Central Europe this notion prevailed from the end of the 1980s in many analyses just as it had in Western Europe. The course of revolutionary changes in Central Europe and their consequences tells us that this approach to understanding events also holds for Eastern Europe—where former republics of the USSR are located.

In applying the concept of causality the question arises: Can the principle of such waves of stability be applied to the countries of Eastern Europe? An unambiguous answer will have to be based on a series of complex phenomena, especially if one considers that since the nations of the Baltic have become members of NATO and the EU they are now part of Central Europe.

For instance, the stability of Belarus is provided by a structure not considered to be democratic. Nevertheless the arrangement is accepted by a large majority of Belarusians and is even acceptable to a majority of citizens of Russia.

Ukraine in this context has by any measure an extremely unstable government for two reasons: a declared intention to generate a superficial image of democracy competing with fierce internal struggles for public ownership.

The secession of Kazakhstan from the USSR went relatively smoothly, however other former Central Asian and Transcaucasus nations exhibit from time to time alarming levels of instability. One need not look far for current examples; the situation in Georgia alone is evidence enough.

The words “revolution of the year 1989” themselves intuitively trigger a search for the answer to the question of the causal nature of the influence of the events in the USSR and the European members of the “socialist commonwealth.” In this context it can be argued that the revolutionary reforms in the nations of the region could not have happened without the changes in the USSR, nor could these revolutionary reforms have been without influence on the sequence of events in the USSR ultimately leading to the collapse of the Soviet model of socialism in an area reaching from Berlin to Vladivostok.

This process was accompanied by the desire to preserve order in international relations across a wide plane: from Brest (the French one, not the Belarus one) to Vladivostok—or even from Vancouver to Vladivostok. The expressions of hope such as

the vision of a “Common European Home” turned out in many ways to be utopian, but they have not been dispelled to this day. The ideas therefore that this twenty-year period of history has engendered have not lost their attractiveness. Moreover, the appeal to return to the basic tenants of socialist reform take on new meaning as the world searches for a means to mobilize resources of all nations in mastering the crises which are affecting the whole world. It is likely that such aspirations will reflect the principle of cause and effect as is already being evidenced by thinkers searching for new solutions.

In conclusion, the way of thinking that has emerged from the study of the political events in the USSR and the rest of the countries considered here from at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s deserves primary attention: The interaction between these events was causal, that is, one event was usually the consequence of the other. Once the political winds of reform blowing in the USSR were felt, the countries under discussion began to contemplate possible solutions to the problem of single-party authority. In turn, these political trends carried over to the USSR where over time they assumed commonly shared features.

The final result was a transformation of all European members of the so-called “socialist commonwealth.” Paradoxically these former socialist entities at least pro forma returned to the fold of nations in the Central European area—in contrast to the countries of Eastern Europe, especially Russia. This, however, is already a topic for still another discourse. Whereby such a discourse will most certainly require the principles of causality set forth here.

This has been an attempt to provide an answer to a two-part question: Did Soviet perestroika stir revolutionary tendencies in the nations of the “Eastern bloc” in the years 1989 and 1990 and to what extent did the intensity of these tendencies lead to the ultimate consequences of perestroika in the USSR? It is apparent that the links between the given events were of a causal nature: After becoming aware of the principles of political renewal issuing from the USSR, the countries in question were able to contemplate various ways of resolving the issue of monopolistic communistic parties. In turn many of these options were adopted in the USSR. Ultimately all members of the “socialist commonwealth” in Europe underwent a process of transformation, even including the breakup of former federative systems contained within them.

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