



Reform and Transparency: Understanding Perestroika and Glasnost in Soviet History

Rudraksh Singh Sisodia, Anshumaan Tandon , Rishab Jain

Student, Student , Student

Faculty of law(B.A.LL.B.(Hons.))

Rajiv Gandhi National University of Law (RGNUL), Patiala, Punjab, India

1. Introduction

Definition of Perestroika and Glasnost

In the 1980s, the Soviet Union's perestroika and glasnost initiatives had significant global impact. Glasnost refers to openness and transparency, while perestroika refers to the reorganisation of the Soviet Union's governmental and economic systems. These initiatives represented a substantial shift from the Soviet Union's previous policies of secrecy and centralization.

Mikhail Gorbachev suggested perestroika in 1985 to address economic and social concerns that had plagued the Soviet Union for years. Gorbachev agreed that the Soviet political system and economy were stiff and inefficient, making it difficult to address these concerns. He believed that the Soviet economy and society could only be revived by significant adjustments that promoted flexibility and openness.

During the perestroika period, the Soviet Union implemented important economic changes such as market-based incentives and enhanced private enterprise independence. These measures aimed to increase the efficiency and responsiveness of the Soviet economy by decreasing bureaucracy and increasing competitiveness.¹ The policy increased regional governments' independence, promoting political decentralisation.¹

Glasnost, introduced concurrently with Perestroika, aimed to increase transparency and accessibility inside Soviet society. The approach encouraged public debate on social and political concerns, while promoting freedom of expression and the press. The Soviet people gained freedom to express themselves without fear of official punishment.

Glasnost also enabled greater transparency in the government and public sector. As a result, the Soviet people gained access to previously classified information concerning official plans and choices. The strategy was

¹ Gorbachev, Mikhail. *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World*. Harper & Row, 1987.

intended to promote greater transparency and responsiveness in governance by allowing Soviet citizens to monitor their leaders and institutions.

Perestroika and glasnost together indicated a significant shift in Soviet policy, with far-reaching implications for both the country and the rest of the globe. By encouraging greater transparency and honesty in Soviet society, the policies aided in the development of a more engaged and knowledgeable citizenry. They also allowed for greater economic independence, boosting the Soviet economy and reducing its reliance on central planning.²

Perestroika and Glasnost, however, were not without problems. As the Soviet Union attempted to react to the new economic and political realities, its policies created a tremendous deal of uncertainty and volatility. The measures had unintended repercussions, such as the expansion of nationalist groups in Soviet countries and the rise of organised crime.

Perestroika and Glasnost eventually played a crucial role in the Soviet Union's demise by eroding its authority and fueling calls for greater autonomy and democracy. The measures, which were key turning moments in Soviet history, are now analysed by academics and decision-makers as a cautionary tale about the risks and advantages of political and economic reform.

The historical context leading up to their implementation.

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 resulted in the formation of the Soviet Union in 1922. During his control over the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin prioritised rapid industrialization and collectivization of agriculture. Stalin's policies, including political repression and starvation, led to millions of deaths.

Following Stalin's death in 1953, the Soviet Union experienced a period of leadership transition, with a number of new leaders taking power. However, the Soviet Union remained a one-party state, with the Communist Party controlling all aspects of society.

By the 1970s, the Soviet Union had fallen behind the West in terms of scientific and budgetary growth due to a sluggish economy. Furthermore, there were growing calls for political reform both internationally and within the Soviet Union.

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev became the Communist Party's general secretary despite this history. Gorbachev was a reformer who recognised that for the Soviet Union to thrive in the modern world, it needed to modernise.

Perestroika, Gorbachev's first major policy initiative, aimed to overhaul the Soviet economy. Perestroika aimed to decentralise economic decision-making, allow some private corporate ownership, and introduce market mechanisms into the Soviet economy.³

² Gorbachev, Mikhail. "Speech to the 19th Communist Party Conference." 27 June 1988, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/gorbachev/1988/06/27.htm>.

³ Nove, Alec. *The Soviet Economic System*. 3rd ed., Routledge, 1991.

Gorbachev also recognised the importance of political opening, which culminated in the implementation of glasnost. Glasnost was an openness and transparency programme that aimed to expand press, speech, and political dissident freedoms.

Perestroika and glasnost marked a significant departure from the Soviet Union's previous method of governing. Hardliners in the Communist Party, who were opposed to reform, were outspokenly against the measures.

Despite opposition, Gorbachev pushed through measures to modernise the Soviet Union and strengthen international relations. The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the end of the Cold War and the Soviet era of domination in Eastern Europe. However, the subsequent reforms were insufficient.

Their significance in the Soviet Union and beyond

During Mikhail Gorbachev's leadership, the Soviet Union implemented two key reforms: perestroika and glasnost in the mid-1980s. Perestroika aimed to reform the Soviet economy, whereas glasnost prioritised government and societal transparency.

These reforms had enormous impact on the Soviet Union and other countries.

Perestroika modernised the Soviet economy by decentralising economic decisionmaking and implementing market-oriented policies. In several fields, the government promoted private business, foreign investment, and competition. This shift led to a surge in consumer goods output and the emergence of new entrepreneurs. However, it exposed the flaws and frauds of the Soviet planned economy, leading to economic instability and social unrest.

Glasnost aimed to make the Soviet government and society more accessible and transparent. This legislation significantly improved press freedom, free speech, and political engagement. The Soviet Union allowed for open criticism of leadership and discussion of previously taboo topics such as Soviet history, human rights, and environmental issues.

These changes had a significant impact on the entire world, including the Soviet Union. Perestroika and glasnost enabled the end of the Cold War and reconciliation between the Soviet Union and the United States. Glasnost's emphasis on openness and transparency empowered citizens in the Soviet Union, inspiring numerous Eastern European nations to demand political and economic reforms as well. This eventually led to the breakdown of the Iron Curtain in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in 1991.

Perestroika and glasnost were significant reforms that impacted both the Soviet Union and the world. The Soviet Union aimed to reform its economy and improve transparency in government and society. The end of the Cold War and fall of the Soviet

Union resulted from substantial political and economic changes.⁴

⁴ Brown, Archie. *The Gorbachev Factor*. Oxford University Press, 1996.

2. Origins of Perestroika

The economic problems facing the Soviet Union in the 1980s

The Soviet Union's fiscal problems in the 1980s eventually contributed to its demise. These challenges were caused by decades of centralised planning, a lack of market incentives and innovation, as well as changes in the global economic and political scene.

The ineffective and rigid Soviet economic system, which prioritised bureaucracy and state control, was a major worry. This led to a lack of innovation, subpar products, and supply and demand imbalances. Furthermore, corruption and a lack of accountability in the system harmed societal trust and economic efficiency.

The Soviet Union's reliance on natural resources, particularly oil and gas, was another concern. These resources provided large foreign currency profits, but also increased the economy's vulnerability to price fluctuations and external shocks. The 1980s oil price drop severely harmed the Soviet economy, resulting in decreased income and increased international debt.⁵

During the 1980s, the Soviet Union also had population concerns. The elderly population and declining birth rate put a burden on the labour force and social assistance systems. This hindered the economy's ability to adapt to global changes and compete with other nations, as well as a lack of investment in education and technology.

In the 1980s, the Soviet Union's global status deteriorated. The United States and its allies increased pressure on the country to limit Soviet influence and advance democratic and market-oriented reforms. This placed the Soviet Union in a precarious position as it tried to reconcile home issues with global challenges.

The Soviet Union's economic woes in the 1980s were caused by several factors, including a lack of market incentives, reliance on natural resources, demographic issues, and a changing global political climate. These issues contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the transition to a market-based economy in the 1990s.

Gorbachev's rise to power and his reform agenda

Mikhail Gorbachev took over as leader of the Soviet Union in 1985, after the Communist Party's third general secretary died. The Politburo and the Communist

The party's leadership body appointed him to the position of General Secretary. Gorbachev's commitment to reforming the Soviet Union was clear during his rise to power. He aimed to reform the nation's economy and government structure, recognising that the Soviet system needed to change. His approach was based on glasnost and perestroika, two key concepts. (openness).

⁵ Kramer, Mark. "The Collapse of the Soviet Union and the End of the Cold War." *The Cambridge History of the Cold War: Volume III, Endings*, edited by Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 402-423.

The Soviet economy underwent reforms during Perestroika, including decentralisation and the adoption of market ideas. Gorbachev recognised that the Soviet economy was antiquated and inefficient, and he worked to modernise it by giving businesses more freedom and fostering rivalry.⁶

Glasnost emphasised more government transparency and openness. Gorbachev aimed to improve accountability and transparency in the Soviet political system, recognising corruption and inefficiencies. This includes increasing public engagement in legislative decision-making and expanding freedom of speech and press.

Opposition to Gorbachev's reform agenda occurred. Gorbachev's reforms were seen as a danger to the authority and power of Soviet leaders, who were averse to change. Some argued that Gorbachev's reforms were insufficient and called for even more dramatic changes.

Despite the hurdles, Gorbachev remained committed to his reform goal. To reduce tensions between the two superpowers, he sought to strengthen ties with the West, particularly the US. He intended to stop Soviet participation in Afghanistan, which had negatively impacted the country's economic and defence capabilities.

Gorbachev's reforms finally led to the Soviet Union's disintegration. The introduction of market principles and more political openness led to a shift in the Soviet Union's economic and societal power structure. This contributed to the Soviet Union's demise in 1991, along with racial turmoil and economic deterioration.

Mikhail Gorbachev, who took control in the Soviet Union in 1985, aimed to change the system. Perestroika and glasnost, which modernised the Soviet economy and political structure, laid the groundwork for his reforms. Despite opposition from Soviet authorities, Gorbachev's proposal ultimately led to the Soviet Union's demise.

The role of Chernobyl in shaping Gorbachev's policies

In 1986, a disastrous nuclear accident called the Chernobyl tragedy took place in the Ukrainian SSR, which was then a part of the Soviet Union. The explosion and following radiation leak caused a severe environmental and health catastrophe that seriously harmed the local economy, agriculture, and social structure.

Chernobyl had a significant effect on Soviet politics, and Mikhail Gorbachev's policies were significantly influenced by it. When the accident occurred, Gorbachev was in charge and handled the situation directly. His response to the catastrophe was noteworthy in many respects.

First, Gorbachev recognised the value of transparency and clarity in government. He recognised the severity of the calamity and the public's demand for information. Giving international experts access to the catastrophe site enabled unlimited observation and participation in the response efforts. This decision was noteworthy because it represented a shift from the conventional Soviet ethos of secrecy to a more transparent and responsible form of governance.

⁶ Kotz, David M., and Fred Weir. *Revolution from Above: The Demise of the Soviet System*. Routledge, 1997.

Second, Gorbachev's environmental policies were influenced by the Chernobyl disaster. The episode served as a wake-up call to Gorbachev and his administration, which had long advocated for environmental conservation. In response, he launched a number of environmental initiatives, including the formation of the State Committee on the Environment, the promotion of alternative energy sources, and the development of a national programme to address ecological concerns.

The Chernobyl disaster exposed the Soviet Union's economic fragility, prompting Gorbachev to overhaul its economic system. The crisis highlighted the need for a more diverse economy and addressing structural issues such as corruption, inefficiency, and bureaucracy.

Gorbachev implemented economic reforms including glasnost and perestroika to modernise the Soviet economy and address long-standing difficulties.⁷

To summarise, the Chernobyl disaster had a profound impact on Gorbachev's policies, particularly in terms of environmental preservation, transparency, and the implementation of economic reforms. This terrible incident marked a watershed point in Soviet politics, ushering in a transition away from traditional ways of governance and towards a system that prioritised transparency, accountability, and agility.

3. Glasnost

Definition and purpose of Glasnost

In the 1980s, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev implemented Glasnost, a governmental initiative that translates from Russian as "openness." This transformative step facilitated greater access to information and freedom of expression in the Soviet Union. The fundamental goals of Glasnost were to eliminate entrenched corruption and inefficiency inside the Soviet system while also supporting political and economic reforms. Gorbachev hoped that by increasing openness and transparency, the Soviet Union might move towards a more democratic and affluent society.

Glasnost allowed the Soviet media to cover previously taboo themes such as political wrongdoing and environmental problems. Following the release of political prisoners, dissidents were free to express themselves without fear of retaliation.

Furthermore, Glasnost paved the ground for stronger international relations and increased cultural contact between the Soviet Union and the West.

Overall, the Soviet Union required modernization and reform since it had fallen behind the West in terms of technological and financial development. Glasnost was crucial in opening up Soviet society and promoting more political and social freedoms, despite the fact that it contributed to the Soviet Union's demise.

⁷ Sakwa, Richard. *Gorbachev and His Reforms, 1985-1990*. Philip Allan, 1991.

The impact of glasnost on Soviet politics and society

Mikhail Gorbachev's Glasnost approach, which translates as "openness," was introduced in the mid-1980s. It aimed to increase accountability and transparency in Soviet politics and society. Glasnost largely replaced the strict censorship and repression that had long marked Soviet politics and society.⁸

It had a tremendous impact on Soviet politics and society. It enabled the open debate of formerly forbidden topics and the expressing of official criticism without fear of reprisal. The emergence of Glasnost led in the release of political prisoners, the rehabilitation of purge victims, and the removal of media restrictions.

The policy also resulted in the formation of new political parties and organisations, such as the Democratic Union and the Social Democratic Party, which advocated for political plurality and wider personal freedoms. These organisations had a significant impact on the political upheavals that occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s, ultimately leading to the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Glasnost also had a huge impact on Soviet culture. The expanded freedom for creative and cultural expression resulted in a new wave of literature, art, and music in the Soviet Union. Glasnost also enhanced communication with the outside world, exposing Soviet citizens to previously taboo ideas and perspectives.

Nonetheless, the policy had certain unfavourable consequences. Glasnost increased scrutiny of Soviet leadership and societal structures, causing social and economic turmoil. The economic and political changes under Perestroika exacerbated the political volatility caused by Glasnost.

In essence, Glasnost had a significant impact on Soviet political and social processes. It promoted openness and transparency while also making political and cultural discourse more accessible. Nonetheless, its aftermath resulted in the breakup of the Soviet Union and subsequent periods of political and economic instability.

4. Challenges and Obstacles

Opposition from within the sovereign government.

While Glasnost aimed to improve openness and transparency in Soviet society and politics, perestroika focused on reforming the Soviet economy through moderate market-oriented reforms.

While numerous Soviet citizens endorsed these transformations, certain factions within the Soviet government voiced opposition. These include:

1. **Hardline Communist Party members:** Some in the party viewed Gorbachev's changes as overly radical, fearing a loss of the party's power. They argued that any attempts at reform would only lead to anarchy and instability, calling for the maintenance of the status quo.
2. **Military leadership:** Certain military officers opposed Gorbachev's reforms, fearing they would diminish the Soviet Union's military capability, jeopardising the country's ability to defend itself against perceived threats.

⁸ Service, Robert. A History of Modern Russia: From Tsarism to the Twenty-First Century. Harvard University Press, 2005.

3. **Nationalists:** Several Soviet republics had long-standing grievances against Moscow's centralised authority and saw Gorbachev's reforms as a danger to their sovereignty. The rise of nationalist factions in these republics, some of whom opposed Glasnost and Perestroika, heightened their concerns.
4. **Bureaucrats:** Some Soviet government officials were hesitant to reform, fearing that such reforms would undermine their authority and influence. Furthermore, concerns about job security and increased competition from the private sector fueled their reluctance to change.

Overall, opposition to Perestroika and Glasnost originated from a desire to preserve the current system and concerns about the consequences of change. Nonetheless, Gorbachev's reform efforts were ultimately insufficient, resulting in the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991.

The impact of perestroika on Soviet republics

The Soviet republics experienced a wide range of significant consequences as a result of perestroika.

On the one side, perestroika allowed the Soviet republics to gain more political and fiscal autonomy. Gorbachev's glasnost programme encouraged public discussion and criticism of official policies, leading to a call for increased regional control. Republics gained control over their local economies and natural resources, and some were allowed to establish their own constitutions and judicial systems.⁹

The republics experienced significant challenges because of economic reforms implemented during the perestroika era. Liberalisation and privatisation policies worsened inflation and led to shortages of vital products, disproportionately affecting developing countries. Economic shocks primarily harmed countries that relied heavily on Soviet help and state-run industry.

Perestroika led to increased nationalist movements and renewed national identity in various republics. The Glasnost policy encouraged political activism and rallies by facilitating the expression of concerns and demands for greater autonomy. Several republics publicly opposed the central government's rule, leading to increased aspirations for regional autonomy or independence.

The tensions prompted the Soviet Union's disintegration in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were the first to declare independence in 1990, ahead of neighbouring republics like Ukraine and Georgia. The abortive coup attempt against Gorbachev in August 1991 signalled the beginning of the Soviet Union's downfall, which was formally dissolved by the end of that year.

In conclusion, Perestroika had a significant impact on the Soviet republics, enabling more political and economic autonomy, reviving nationalist feelings, and eventually leading to the disintegration of the Soviet Union. These changes long-term impact continues to alter the region's political and economic dynamics.

⁹ Fainsod, Merle. *How Russia Is Ruled*. Harvard University Press, 1970.

Critical Analysis and Conclusion

In conclusion, the events surrounding Perestroika and Glasnost, both implemented by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in the mid-1980s, demonstrate interconnected programmes aimed at reforming the Soviet political and economic structures. Perestroika, which emphasised "restructuring," attempted to address the Soviet economy's inefficiencies and stagnation with market-oriented programmes. Meanwhile, Glasnost, which means "openness," sought to promote transparency, political inclusion, and public participation in decision-making processes.

One of the most significant events of this era was the Chernobyl tragedy in 1986, which highlighted long-ignored environmental and safety concerns inside the Soviet establishment. This calamity increased public criticism of the Soviet administration and called into question its ability to administer the country.

Another notable event was the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, which ended the Cold War and began a new chapter in international relations. Gorbachev's reforms triggered political and economic developments that led to the end of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

Ultimately, despite its huge ramifications, Perestroika and Glasnost failed to address all of the Soviet Union's underlying flaws, leading to its eventual collapse in 1991. Nonetheless, the reforms implemented during this period had a lasting impact on Russian society, providing the framework for the country's transition to a market economy and democracy in the post-Soviet era.

These reforms had a significant impact on the Soviet Union and the world, and several important lessons can be learned from them:

- The importance of economic and political reform: Perestroika and Glasnost showed that the Soviet Union needed significant economic and political reforms to survive and compete in the modern world. The lesson here is that countries and governments need to be willing to adapt and change to remain relevant and successful.
- The danger of centralized planning: The Soviet Union's centralized planning model was one of the major reasons for its economic problems. The lesson here is that too much government control can stifle innovation and economic growth.
- The power of transparency: Glasnost, which means "openness," allowed for greater transparency and public discussion of previously taboo topics. This led to greater accountability and helped to expose corruption and abuses of power. The lesson here is that transparency and openness are essential for building trust and promoting democracy.
- The importance of international cooperation: Perestroika and Glasnost helped to improve relations between the Soviet Union and the West, which had been strained for decades. The lesson here is that cooperation and communication between countries can help to prevent conflicts and promote mutual understanding.
- The danger of rapid change: Perestroika and Glasnost led to significant changes in the Soviet Union, but these changes also created a lot of uncertainty and instability. The lesson here is that reform needs to be managed carefully and gradually, to avoid unintended consequences and social upheaval.

References

1. "Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World" by Mikhail Gorbachev
2. "Glasnost: An Anthology of Russian Literature Under Gorbachev" edited by Helena Goscilo and Byron Lindsey
3. "The Rise and Fall of Communism" by Archie Brown
4. "The Cold War: A New History" by John Lewis Gaddis
5. "Gorbachev: His Life and Times" by William Taubman
6. "The Soviet Union Under Gorbachev" by Martin McCauley
7. "The Making of the Soviet System: Essays in the Social History of Interwar Russia" by Moshe Lewin
8. "The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union" by Serhii Plokhy
9. "A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev" by Vladislav Zubok
10. "Russia and the Idea of the West: Gorbachev, Intellectuals, and the End of the Cold War" by Robert D. English
11. "Glasnost in Action: Cultural Renaissance in Russia" by Alexander Dallin and Gail W. Lapidus
12. "The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times" by Odd Arne Westad
13. "Soviet Society Under Perestroika" by David Lane
14. "Perestroika and Soviet National Security" by Robert Legvold
15. "Gorbachev and Perestroika" by John Keep