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Mikhail Gorbachev
Lessons and Warnings

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Mikhail Gorbachev: Lessons and Warnings

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Abstract:

The paper contains reflections of Ruslan Grinberg, a prominent Russian economist and social scientist, dedicated to the death of Mikhail Gorbachev. Grinberg serves as an advisor to Gorbachev during the Perestroika era and had close contact with him throughout the last three decades. In the essay, he reflects upon the key elements of Gorbachev's legacy and their importance for the contemporary world.

Keywords:

Mikhail Gorbachev; economic reforms in Russia and in the USSR; cold war; economic and political liberties.

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Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev died recently. Literally a month before his death, I visited him in the hospital. We were able to talk a little... And today, when he passed away, as if continuing our conversations with him, I want to share my thoughts about what he has done for the country and for the world and what lessons from this should be taken into account by future reformers. After all, it is quite obvious that sooner or later Russia will have a chance to democratize the country again, and I would like this chance not to be lost, as it happened with the first (February Revolution of 1917) and with the second ones (perestroika, or restructuring, of 1985).

First, about what has been done. A lot has already been said and written about this, and there will be even more. I will name only two, in my opinion, unique and the most enormous achievements of Mikhail Sergeyevich. The first is freedom for his compatriots, Soviet citizens. The second is the liberation from the fear of all the inhabitants of the earth before a nuclear war.

Somewhere in the middle of the last century, the famous Bernard Shaw, concerned about the huge lag in the ethical progress of mankind from its scientific and technological achievements, bitterly remarked: "we have already learned to fly like birds and swim like fish; it remains to learn how to live like people." It was to this noble cause that Mikhail Gorbachev devoted his life, who, like no other politician in recent history, was able to really "humanize" the country and the world. Let not for a long time but wasn't his "new thinking" as well as the liberation perestroika a unique experience of the practical implementation of the idea of "living like people"? Having done away with Soviet totalitarianism and having done everything possible to improve the moral climate in the country, Gorbachev showed the world and us how to arrange the life of citizens without authoritarian order, without political violence, without a lordly-servile attitude to each other, and most importantly - without fear of their own government and the rest of the world.

So today's Russia, despite the growing authoritarianism, is noticeably different from the country it was in pre-Gorbachev times, when even the current space of freedom seemed impossible. That is, not all the seeds of freedom sown by him have been trampled. And I believe that perestroika one way or another, sooner or later, in one guise or another, will definitely be continued. There will also be a renaissance of "new thinking" if homo sapiens really becomes intelligent.

The First Cold War could have been stopped because the then Soviet leadership, surrounded by Mikhail Gorbachev, in thoughts and actions defeated the very logic of the arms race, the essence

of which boils down to the well-known maxim "if you want peace, prepare for war." And it was thanks to this that the suspicious West agreed with Gorbachev to completely abandon the short- and medium-range missiles and achieve mutual nuclear disarmament with the United States by 80 percent. The path to a peaceful future seemed open. In fact, the Cold War ended without a single shot being fired, and without victory or defeat of any of the parties. So Gorbachev's vision of "a pan-European home" and even Kant's utopia of "Eternal Peace" seemed close to reality. But somehow everything went wrong...

The Charter of Paris and "New Thinking" have been forgotten, almost all disarmament and arms limitation treaties have been terminated, nuclear weapons have become socially acceptable again, their possible first use is now directly enshrined in the doctrines of the United States and Russia, nuclear warheads are being modernized. And all this is happening in an extremely unstable geopolitical environment.

Now about Gorbachev's lessons for compatriots, but not only for them. The main one, in my opinion, is that political expediency, no matter how desirable it may seem at one or another historical moment, in principle cannot be realized by abolishing democratic institutions. Otherwise, the inevitable revival of autocracy, as it happened in Russia.

Politicians who considered and consider themselves democrats today, some freely, and some by virtue of magical thinking, in the post-Gorbachev period did a lot to ensure that Russia returned to, so to speak, "legitimate" autocracy. When it became clear that in fair elections they would lose power and, most likely, lose the juicy results of privatization, by the way, the most unfair of those that took place in world history, they decided, as an exception, not to allow a change of power at any cost. And of course all this was done in the name of further democratic development of Russia.

I remember what a touching unity was manifested then between the government of the Young Reformers and the liberal media, which openly sided with the current government before the presidential elections in 1996. Moreover, many of them were even proud of it. I remember the phrase of a well-known TV journalist that angered me, who solemnly declared then that Boris Yeltsin had won the election, because "Moscow journalists sacrificed their professional duty for the sake of a civilian one".

But in fact, the loss of another chance to democratize Russia began three years earlier with the dissolution of the parliament due to Boris Yeltsin's inability to reach a compromise with the legislature and ended with the creation of a super-presidential Constitution.

Here I would like to recall the words of John Maynard Keynes: "Crazy politicians in power have a much greater significance in history than is commonly thought." In Russia, the deification of "the free market" by the post-Gorbachev elite led, as expected, to the fact that its arrival not only did not give the desired prosperity, but also worsened the financial situation of the majority. And this could not but give rise to mass distrust of Russians towards democracy and the market.

To be fair, it should be noted that such an objective factor as the "spirit of the times" actively contributed to this. Each epoch has its own. It is quite obvious that Mikhail Gorbachev started perestroika at the wrong time. But, as you know, "times are not chosen, they live and die in them"...

It was in the 1950s and 1960s that the spirit of the times was such that the spirit of justice ruled the world. Freedom was also an important value at that time, but still it was in second place. By the way, Mikhail Sergeyevich writes in his book "December-1991. My Position" is that it would be good to carry out reforms exactly at such a time. At least because we traditionally both love and hate the West, but for some reason we are always sure that it is precisely he who knows how to do it. And that's why we listen to him. And namely, in those years, the West was social, social-democratic.

It is no coincidence that it was then that the attitude to building socialism with a human face appeared and began to spread. Let's recall Alexander Dubcek's reforms in Czechoslovakia, and in other socialist countries - in Poland or Hungary... Of course, Mikhail Gorbachev was a passionate supporter of this direction. If the reforms had started at that time, who knows how things would have turned out... In any case, the spirit of the times of those years made it possible to build a world on the positions of equality, justice and freedom that prevailed in those years.

But, alas, Russian reforms began at a time when individualism reigned supreme in the world with its unconditional recognition of the omnipotence of the market, which played a cruel joke. Out of fashion were those who knew that if the market was left unregulated, it would only enrich the few and create mass poverty. What, in fact, did happen in Russia.

And the injustice that has developed in the country is largely the result of the glorification of freedom alone. According to one of its main apostles of that time, the American economist Milton Friedman, if you choose freedom, you will have justice, but if you choose justice, you will not have freedom. It turned out that this is not true. In fact, if you prefer freedom and ignore

justice, you lose both. However, the same thing happens if the superiority of justice over freedom is declared. Mikhail Gorbachev constantly insisted on the equality of these two great values, and this is another lesson of his.

Today, our entire turbulent world is on the verge of fundamental changes. And I am convinced that if we really want to live more or less decently on the planet and in our country, nothing better has been invented, except democracy and a social market economy, only now it must also be ecological. In general, there is no reasonable alternative to the one that Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev represented. And its most accurate name is "society with a human face".