

# The best way to help Gorbachev is to make life difficult for him.

By Vladimir Kvint

11 June 1990

*Forbes Magazine*

IN FAILING TO press Gorbachev on behalf of Lithuanian freedom, the Western governments may have unwittingly brought to a halt the further progress of perestroika. President Bush and his allies wanted to avoid pushing Gorbachev into a corner. Instead they have strengthened the hands of those in the Soviet Union who are trying to stop the movement of progress.

The general attitude in the U.S. seems to be the following: Gorbachev has liberated the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe; now he is in a difficult situation, and America should support him whatever he does.

I also think Gorbachev need help. But a totally different kind to help.

Few Americans, even those who specialize in Soviet affairs, have any idea about the real processes of making decisions, about the methods of collecting reliable data in the U.S.S.R. It is not their fault. In Siberia, for example, only three or four cities are open to foreigners, and there they will definitely see nothing. It is almost impossible to understand the situation in the U.S.S.R. having never descended to a mine in Norilsk, never spoken with the outlaws of society in Penza, nor traveled to the Arctic zone, which occupies 40% of Soviet territory.

Without correct information, it is difficult to understand the forces moving Gorbachev to perestroika. These forces were partly domestic, the sick economy and increasing demands for democracy. But outside forces were at least as important. The outside forces were Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and Helmut Kohl. Acting together, these forces brought the U.S.S.R. to the table of negotiations and led to the first historic agreements between Gorbachev and Reagan.

I don't mean to say that Mikhail Gorbachev is not a positive figure. He is. Other Soviet leaders would have tried to deal with the festering problems with military force. However, he is not the initiator; he is the follower. When he took over five years ago, the country was already on the verge of disaster. The people had lost their faith in everything. Labor productivity stopped growing after 1978. In natural resources, each additional unit of output

required increasing input; oil wells had to pump much deeper, mining and exploration went farther and farther east, farther and farther north. In 1985-86 oil production started to decrease by 4.2% a year. In every respect, the Soviet economy was at a dead end.

In 1985 Mikhail Gorbachev, in charge of agriculture, was the youngest member of the Politburo. Agriculture was proving to be the Bermuda Triangle of the Soviet economy; vast investments were poured into it only to disappear without increasing output. He was the first Soviet leader to take seriously reports sent to him by Siberian economists on the disintegrating economy. Most other Soviet leaders tried to ignore the facts.

But remember this: Gorbachev did not appear from nowhere. He was not a total break with the past. He grew within the almighty party bureaucratic system. Gorbachev is an excellent tactician, and he obeyed all the laws of that dark and illogical system.

Theoretically, under communist ideology, the majority rules. In reality, a tiny elite minority suppresses the majority. The system creates lies upon cynical lies. For example, in 1964, when Khrushchev was in the south on vacation with his longtime colleague Mikoyan, the Politburo gathered in Moscow to overthrow Khrushchev. When Mikoyan saw the way the wind was blowing, he immediately sent to Moscow a "wise" telegram. "I side with the majority." This cynicism is typical of the Communist Party leaders. The "majority" Mikoyan sided with was in fact a tiny minority suppressing tens of millions of Soviet citizens.

So, while making Gorbachev a star, America should not forget that he is a leader of the same Communist Party that did all this. And Gorbachev always insists that perestroika is only an improvement of socialism.

By 1985 major forces outside the country were influencing Gorbachev. By escalating the arms race, Reagan and Bush pushed military expenses sky-high for the U.S.S.R. The weak economy of the U.S.S.R. could not bear the burden any longer.

# The best way to help Gorbachev is to make life difficult for him.

By Vladimir Kvint

While Reagan, along with Margaret Thatcher and Helmut Kohl, was applying pressure, events within the Soviet Union were strengthening the position of the democratic forces there. People were becoming disgusted by the cruel, corrupted system and appalled by the coffins arriving every day from Afghanistan.

Gorbachev, responding to the strength of popular anger, moved toward democracy. For example, many people demanded the government confess Stalin's guilt for his crimes. But only when these demands became almost irresistible did Gorbachev accede to them. Gorbachev is and was part of that same reactive system, which does not initiate reform but grants it only reluctantly when the pressures become irresistible.

Up to the very last day Gorbachev spoke against the amendment to the Constitution abolishing the provision for the leading role of the Communist Party. And only when members of the Supreme Council, supported by millions of people, voiced their protest, did he agree.

To Gorbachev's credit, he responded to the demand for democracy in a positive manner. However, Gorbachev should not be called a liberator of Eastern Europe. What is happening there was not a matter of his wishes. At the end of 1988-89 the communist regimes there were in a state of clinical death. Hunger in Poland and Romania became a real danger. Economic war among the socialist countries was on the way. Democratic forces inside these countries were ready to take power. The economic basis of tyranny had collapsed—this, and not any special Gorbachev strategy, is what has liberated Eastern Europe.

In the beginning of perestroika, bureaucrats and other reactionary forces were thrown on the defensive. Political reforms in the country found such strong promoters as Alexander Yakovlev. But Prime Minister Ryzhkov dragged his heels and proposals by market-oriented economists were not implemented. The few elements of a market economy that were finally introduced were overwhelmed in the horrendous chaos of a so-called planned economy.

By the end of 1989 the foot-dragging had allowed the bureaucrats to consolidate with Russian nationalists and anti-Semites to create a powerful force against reform. This, combined with the West's weakening, less definite

position, stopped social revolution in the U.S.S.R. in March 1990. This was reflected in the people Gorbachev personally selected to join the President's council. Out of 16 members, only 3 can be called progressive. The notorious anti-Semitic leader Valentin Rasputin is a member.

Hitler failed in his ambition to hold a parade in Red Square, but Pamyat, the Russian fascist, anti-Semitic organization, held a meeting in Red Square. Just as the czar's agents used anti-Semitism as a means of turning popular discontent away from the regime, so is the KGB using it today.

Lithuania came as a test of Gorbachev's new position. Toward the end of 1989 it was suggested to Gorbachev that he could abolish the Union Treaty (which was signed in 1922; Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania were chained forcibly to the U.S.S.R. in 1940) and allow the republics the opportunity to join the U.S.S.R. under new, mutually beneficial, fair conditions. Gorbachev failed to do so. Lithuania and the other Baltic states went on to declare their independence.

As the antireform forces gained strength, Gorbachev dithered, in large part because the Western powers let up their pressure. Kohl seems willing to concede anything for the opportunity to unify Germany. Thatcher is loyal to her views, but her own position in Britain has become weaker. The White House has adopted a much softer line.

However, what Gorbachev badly needs is renewed pressure from the West, to help nudge the system back on to the path of reform and democratization. It is a general belief in the West that if the West supports Lithuania's demands for freedom, it is going to ruin Gorbachev. What about the supposed danger that Gorbachev will be overthrown if the West puts too much pressure on the U.S.S.R. over Lithuania or any other matter? It's nonsense. Gorbachev is not in danger. What happened to Khrushchev cannot happen to Gorbachev. In Khrushchev's time there was only one decisive force—the Politburo, whose members decided to overthrow the leader. But today there are four Comrade President, the KGB, the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the Supreme Soviet (the

# The best way to help Gorbachev is to make life difficult for him.

By Vladimir Kvint

parliament). But there is one main power: the President. He brings together other dispersed forces. They need him, if only as a symbol.

The KGB? It is as active as ever. But it is controlled by the President. The party? I am sure that the Communist Party, which is disintegrating now, in half a year will be abandoned by a lot of important people. After the next elections it will definitely lose its majority status.

The military? The U.S.S.R. should not be mistaken for Chile or Nicaragua. The Soviet military has never been a powerful force in its own right. The rumors concerning the political role of “military discontent” are nothing but a political game. Soviet military people have always been nothing but pawns on the political chessboard. The military is an instrument, not a wielder, of power.

As for the KGB overthrowing Gorbachev, that’s out of the question. The KGB’s people are counting on Gorbachev to rescue them from the people’s wrath. They remember all too well what happened to the secret police after the democratic upsets in Eastern Europe.

So Gorbachev is not in danger, but his reforms are. If America is firm, Gorbachev will find arguments to resist the diehards in the U.S.S.R. He will be able to say to them: If we crush Lithuania, America will not sign arms control agreements or trade agreements and we will not be able to feed the people. We must let Lithuania go.

The U.S.S.R. is a prison of nations, and no republic, including the Russian Federation, wants this union anymore. The prisoner and the guard are both unhappy.

The antidemocratic forces in the U.S.S.R. have no economic basis anymore, but they can flourish if the U.S. offers arms control, scientific-technical cooperation and investments—without demanding important domestic political concessions in return.

The 1917 revolution, or rather counterrevolution, repressed the Russian spring of economic development for 72 years. Only the undoing of that revolution and its replacement with a democratic regime can get the country’s economy moving to market. Shortsighted efforts to “save Gorbachev” will serve only to save a rotten regime from history’s garbage heap for a few years longer.

Vladimir Kvint is a professor at the U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences and at the Vienna Economic University.