

Gorbachev Steered Things in a Constructive Way

INTERVIEW WITH PAVEL R. PALAZCHENKO

Pavel Palazchenko has been an advisor and translator for Mikhail Gorbachev since 1985. During perestroika he worked out of the foreign ministry and later the presidential office and also advised and interpreted for Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze. He currently is a consultant at the Gorbachev Foundation in Moscow. His memoirs appeared as *My Years with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1997). In this interview, he speaks about the origins of new political thinking, of the Kremlin's reaction to the 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe and German reunification, of relations with President George H. W. Bush, and the ability of Gorbachev to “frame issues in ways that made people think realistically and responsibly.”

Demokratizatsiya: Gorbachev has admitted many mistakes in economic reforms, in cadre policies, and in other fields. But in foreign policy I get the sense that he is proud of what he achieved. But if he could do it all over again in this field, what would he do differently?

Palazchenko: That's an interesting question that perhaps we should ask him directly. But I sense that you are right. Of those various aspects of perestroika that you mention, it is foreign policy that he would probably change the least. My feeling is that on subtler, finer points, such as whether it was wise in Reykjavík to tie together the entire package of nuclear issues—including ABMs [antiballistic missiles], strategic weapons, and INF [intermediate range nuclear forces]—there would be some rethinking. Or whether it was such a good idea when President George Bush senior started his reassessment of policy towards the USSR—which took six to eight months and which, in my opinion, was a waste of time—whether perhaps it would have been better for Gorbachev to insist that they should hit the ground running, to find a way to compel Bush to act more swiftly. Perhaps he should have looked into that possibility. Or perhaps whether after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan there should have been an effort

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made to continue to work together with the Americans, Pakistanis, Indians, and others, to put together some coalition government in order to prevent the Taliban from taking over the country. Whether it was wise to let the Afghans, after our withdrawal, to just simmer in their own juices.

So, there were a number of things that he may have wanted to reconsider, but they were not, I believe, of fundamental importance, and certainly different decisions could have been taken on each one of those three issues, and I suspect there could be more. But that would not change the overall direction, and I believe that this overall direction was very important and did a lot to really establish a pattern of cooperative security, of partnership, of addressing issues and not letting go, not allowing the disagreements on peripheral issues and sometimes very important issues to affect the overall attitude of cooperation. I believe that all of those things were established at that time—and they weren't in the subsequent years. And even now when, for example, during the war in Iraq it turned out that Russia and the United States had very substantial differences on a major issue, I think it is in part because of the Gorbachev-Reagan example that Russia and the United States did not allow that issue to overwhelm the entire relationship, even to set the tone for the entire relationship. Again, I think the roots of that go back to the years of perestroika and I think the pattern was set at that time. And I think that our leaders including, by the way, Yeltsin and Clinton, including Putin and Bush, showed that they are sticking to that general approach that was developed during those years at the end of the cold war and the establishment of a pattern of cooperation.

Demokratizatsiya: You mentioned Bush senior and the reassessment of policy towards the USSR when he came to power. Reagan even came out and criticized Bush, saying he should speed things up.

Palazchenko: Yes, I think it was a waste of time. And it's so unfortunate because had we been able to use those five or six months to search for solutions to issues like START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty), which I am sure that Reagan and [U.S. Secretary of State George] Shultz were not able to sign with Gorbachev—I know definitely Shultz regretted it and he blamed some specific people and some specific institutions for that. So had we been able to work together on those issues during the first few months of the Bush administration, I am sure that we would have had a treaty a year or maybe eighteen months before it was actually signed. And it could have had a great effect on the overall situation in the Soviet Union, as disarmament treaties are popular. It also perhaps would have allowed Gorbachev to more significantly cut back on the arms expenditures, et cetera, et cetera. So I do believe that it was very unfortunate, and I cannot blame Bush senior that much because I believe that his subsequent policies were quite cooperative. And I really give him high marks—both to him and to [U.S. Secretary of State James] Baker for steering a very difficult relationship. The relationship is usually very difficult but they steered in an especially difficult situation since at that time the domestic situation in the Soviet Union was becoming unstable. And they were able to manage that process rather well. I have to give them

high marks for that. It's not that I'm blaming them, but I do very much regret that at that time was not used more wisely.

Demokratizatsiya: What you say goes to the heart of an ongoing debate about the nature of the relation between Bush senior and Gorbachev. Some are convinced that Bush did everything he could to help Gorbachev in those difficult times, while others are very critical of Bush for not having provided more financial and political backing to Gorbachev when he was at his most vulnerable time.

Palazchenko: Well, remember that speech [by Bush in Soviet Ukraine on August 1, 1991] that William Safire or some other wisecrack called "Chicken Kiev"? Politically that was a very important speech. So when people tell me that it was the United States that destroyed the Soviet Union and that it was in the interest of the United States for the Soviet Union to break up, I always tell them, "What about that Kiev speech?" where Bush did say to a very skeptical audience of Ukrainian party leaders basically and some dissidents that were very eager for independence, that they should think twice about breaking up the country. So politically I think he did quite a bit to help Gorbachev.

In terms of economic assistance. . . well, there are two views here. One is that there was a possibility of providing some kind of helping hand—maybe even symbolically—but that would have played well in the Soviet Union at the time and would have helped Gorbachev politically more than it would have helped the Soviet Union economically. And that frankly is my opinion—that more could have been done by the West at that time. But there is another opinion of people who I respect—such as former U.S. ambassador Jack Matlock—who say that at that time there was still no economic program for which support could be given. That is to say, that Gorbachev had dragged things out too long in deciding about some domestic economic plan, et cetera, et cetera. And there may be a grain of truth here, but not much more than a grain. However, while some people then said that Gorbachev's economic plans were extremely backward, that they were slow, or progressive enough and such, I remember Baker telling [Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard] Shevardnadze that they looked at [Soviet economist and Gorbachev advisor Leonid] Abalkin's plan and that they liked what they saw, that this was a very forward-looking plan of transitioning the Soviet economy into a market system. He also said that they compared Abalkin's plan to some other economic programs that were being proposed at that time, such as [Stanislav] Shatalin's and [Grigory] Yavlinsky's plan and that frankly they did not see that much difference. So I think he was very fair and very positive in approaching and assessing those plans. It was a complicated time.

My feeling is that had Gorbachev been given a little more time on either end—had he come a couple of years before or had he been given a couple of years more at the end—we could have had a much smoother transition. I think that could have been possible. I don't think that the result would have been the preservation of the Soviet Union in its former self, its former form. I don't think so. But definitely there would have been a possibility that the transition towards a smaller union with a regulated economy, with private property, moving into the direction

that we are trying to move now—that is to say, building not just a market economy but a functioning market economy—would have been very possible. It always seems afterwards that what actually happened is the only thing that could have happened, but that is not so. I do believe that even though the likelihood of Gorbachev's complete success was not very high, just from the fact that perestroika started in the late 1980s and not in the 1970s, let's say. But the likelihood of greater success existed, and he deserved greater success.

Demokratizatsiya: I think so. Somebody mentioned that changing foreign policy involved just a couple of key ministries and appointments, whereas the economic reforms involved essentially the whole government.

Palazchenko: Absolutely, I agree with that. Also, the fact that our economists, unlike our foreign policy people, were not ready to propose workable solutions, to propose practical approaches to reforming the economy. In foreign affairs, first, things are not as complicated. Second, there are some decisions that the head of state takes and then pushes through the bureaucracy and the hierarchy, which is not easy but back in 1986 and 1987, it was easier, a lot easier than it was afterwards. And Gorbachev took full advantage. For example, the “zero option” on INF missiles, was actually something that worked very much to the Soviet Union's—and now to Russia's—advantage. Because Russia doesn't need such weapons, and if such weapons were to be deployed by either the United States or the European nations and within reach of targets in the European part of the Soviet Union or Russia, that creates a very serious strategic imbalance. So the INF's “zero option” was very much to the Soviet Union's advantage. But, the question is, if it was very much to the Soviet Union's advantage, why wasn't it accepted by Yuri Andropov and Leonid Brezhnev? Well, the answer is easy—because it was proposed by Reagan, and because it was seen as unilateral disarmament. But Gorbachev was able to transcend that, he was able to disregard that.

And so, a lot of things in foreign policy can be done by one determined person, though in the Soviet context he also had to persuade his associates. But his powers of persuasion were very good. Let's say, on the 50 percent reduction on strategic nuclear weapons, the real problem here was whether the Soviet Union was ready to cut 50 percent of its best missiles, the SS-18s, the heaviest missiles. And Gorbachev said yes, and it was fair. Before there was this dogma about the so-called “freedom to mix,” in that the overall mixture of weapons could be cut in half, but in specific categories such as heavy missiles, we want to keep our own. So it took courage for Gorbachev to say, “Yes, we can cut that particular category 50 percent as well.” And it worked—it was a very attractive proposal to the United States. At the same time, it was not unilateral disarmament, it was quite fair and equitable. So a lot of those things can be decided by one person and I believe that's what Gorbachev did. And of course he had tremendous help from Shevardnadze. During the decisive moments, he was able to persuade [Chief of the General Staff of the armed forces and from 1989 military affairs advisor to Gorbachev, Sergei] Akhromeev and [Defense Minister Dmitry] Yazov.

So if you look at this, in terms of complexity, it is miniscule compared to the economy.

Demokratizatsiya: And that touches upon my next question. How is it that a regional party secretary from Stavropol, who dealt mostly with domestic management issues, and a former Party leader of Soviet Georgia, could come up with all these complex ideas about changing radically the nature of foreign policy in the Soviet Union? Which were the sources, the people, the part of the intelligentsia or government behind this new political thinking?

Palazchenko: Well, the intelligentsia did help, the foreign ministry did help. Shevardnadze was very well received in the foreign ministry because from the start he told the diplomats, "From now on you will be able to actually affect policy. You are no longer just a mailbox. You are no longer the transmitters of what the General Staff or the armed forces decide what is possible." So, in that sense he was very welcomed and they responded by actually looking for creative solutions to problems. Secondly, yes, I think that some of the ideas of the intelligentsia, that Andrei Sakharov's idea not only about the inadmissibility of nuclear war but the interdependence of the world, that we are all tied together: that also helped. But most of all I think it was two things. First of all, Gorbachev's intellectual curiosity, and he was very good at propaganda. If the Soviet Union had a position and if he felt that he needed to defend that position using methods of propaganda, he did that. But then there was always the question in his mind, "Well, in terms of propaganda, I can defend that position. But what about the real essence of the issue, the real truth behind that issue?" He had that intellectual curiosity. So he was not hostage to that propaganda. In all domestic and international issues there is always a degree of propaganda, of demagoguery. He could do that. But at the same time he was always intellectually very curious. He was always very interested in what was behind a particular issue—was there a way that the issue could be turned so that we could work it out. That I believe helped.

The second thing, in addition to his keen mind and intellectual curiosity, was I think, frankly, the moral, ethical aspect. He is an intensely moral person. He believed it was his duty to try to put an end to the kind of confrontation, to the kind of nuclear face-off that he inherited. So that I believe was extremely important. And therefore, to him the new political thinking was both an intellectual and a moral crusade. Although he never used the word crusade, and he did not like the word struggle. But it was both.

Demokratizatsiya: About the people who opposed new political thinking, something that is striking is the lack of verbal opposition from the people and institutions that one would think would oppose this idea, because in the end, it would mean less resources for them—for the military-industrial complex, for example. If the tensions go down, there would be less resources for them institutionally.

Palazchenko: Well, they knew, they actually knew, there would be some kind of cutback in the amount of resources they would receive. There was a cut during Brezhnev's time. They understood this. Gorbachev did not—perhaps unfortunately—reduce the military budget in any significant way during his first years in power. He was very reluctant about that because he knew that Nikita Khrushchev suffered in part as a result of this. So he was cautious. But he did indicate to the military and to the military industries that there would be very significant cuts in their resources. And those people were sufficiently intelligent to understand. They knew that that was in store. And initially they believed that the best way to do it would be to reach substantial agreements with the United States rather than doing it unilaterally. And that's why they welcomed new thinking. It was only later when—not necessarily the upper echelons of the military like Yazov—but people still active today like [Aleksandr] Prokhanov for example, when they saw that you also actually had to live by international law, that, for example, if the neighbors don't really want your troops there, then you have to go. To me, it's an axiom. To them, it was not at all axiomatic. And therefore it was only until 1990, during the German reunification process, that they resisted; that they understood that this is not what they wanted, and resistance to new thinking emerged as a real factor.

The interesting thing of course is that at that time, people like [Politburo hardliner Yegor] Ligachev and even [future Soviet Vice President and coup co-conspirator Gennady] Yanaev, were defending new thinking. But many of them today are trying to present themselves as having opposed this, that they always opposed it, that they discerned the badness of all these approaches, et cetera. I think that that is all wrong. They did not resist Gorbachev's new thinking—although they were not the initiators—because even they understood that what had been happening before just could not be allowed to continue.

You know, Gorbachev's time made everyone better, and smarter, more intelligent. At that time, those people were not saying stupid things such as, "The West dismembered the Soviet Union; Gorbachev sold out our country" and things like that. Because at that time I think they were more intellectually honest and more responsible. They were members of the leadership and knew very well that the country needed reform, needed change—that international relations needed to be changed. They understood all that. It was afterwards when people like [then Supreme Soviet chairman and coup coconspirator Anatoly] Lukyanov and others, decided it was best for their purposes to totally amputate, so to say, their relation with Gorbachev and even their participation in many of the policies that they now so vehemently criticize. So the whole thing of resistance should be looked at in the context of the time, when Gorbachev was persuasive, influential, when

he was able to formulate and put the issues in ways that made everyone understand the necessity and perhaps even the inevitability of those decisions.

And some of those decisions were really painful. I mean, German unification. I for one welcomed it wholeheartedly. But I do know that many people found it very painful to accept. Nevertheless it was under Gorbachev that everyone, just about everyone, accepted German unification, even though it was painful. And I think that one of the greatest tributes to Gorbachev is that he was able to steer that process in a nontraumatic way. Had it dragged out for more time, and had we started to raise objections of the kind that [specialist on Germany and head of the Party International Department Valentin] Falin is now suggesting, or had we in any way tried to demonstrate force or project force as again he's now suggesting, that would have poisoned our relations with the German people for years to come. Now we have the most stable foundation for our relations with the Germans for years and decades and centuries to come. And this is one of the biggest accomplishments of Gorbachev.

Demokratizatsiya: And as you mentioned, it was not until the twenty-eighth party congress in July of 1990 where foreign policy was debated as opposed to just accepted as before, and that's an interesting contrast since when the East European regimes—those of Jaruzelski, Husák, Ceaușescu, Zhivkov, and Honecker—fell, as [former Gorbachev personal assistant and later coup co-conspirator Valery] Boldin later complained in his book, nobody raised the alarm inside the Soviet Union, there was complete silence in the structures of the Soviet government. But after, when the process turned from the fall of Honecker to the reunification of Germany, and even more, in NATO, that is when you had a lot of these critics coming out—but not as much as one would expect. At the twenty-eighth party congress you had some extremists like Viktor Alksnis yelling, but by-and-large, for some reason, the German issue was nonetheless not a big issue.

Palazchenko: That's because, I believe, that the great achievement of Gorbachev was that he was able to frame issues in ways that made people think realistically and responsibly. And realistically and responsibly we needed to accept, we had to accept, and we did accept things like sovereignty of the nations that were our neighbors. And I am not referring here to Ukrainians because that was later, but to the Central Europeans. If you are intellectually honest, if you are realistic, if you are responsible, you just have to accept that. They have a right. So when Boldin shouts today, "Why didn't anyone say anything?" my question would be, What was he expecting, or what does he now expect, that people would have said?

Remember, even Brezhnev found it difficult and unpalatable to think about invading Poland in 1981. He found it extremely difficult even to think about that. He did everything to avoid that. And he didn't intervene. So was Boldin stupid enough to think that almost ten years afterwards it would have been possible to intervene, even if Gorbachev had wanted it? Of course, as we now know, including from the notes that Anatoly Chernyaev and others took at meetings of the Politburo and Secretariat, Gorbachev was not even contemplating any kind of use

of force. And in that, by the way, he was fully supported, again, by Ligachev. And again, the difference between Boldin and Ligachev is that while Ligachev definitely regretted that the socialist regimes fell in all of those countries, he is not now saying that this was because of Gorbachev, that this was Gorbachev's fault, or that we should have done something, that we should have used or projected force. The thing about those people, such as Falin for example, whom I used to respect, is that they are not really fully honest intellectually. When Falin says that we should have demonstrated force, What does he mean? Is there some magic trick that he knows? Tell us. If you know this magic trick of demonstrating force in front of hundreds and thousands of unarmed demonstrators who are flooding the streets of Berlin and Leipzig, if you know that magic trick, then tell us. The result is that those people are just trying to look smarter than they really are. They are just huffing and puffing, so to say, instead of specifically saying what could have been done. Because they do know that using force in a real military way was not an option.

Demokratizatsiya: I asked Aleksandr N. Yakovlev that and he said that the enemies of new political thinking would yell and scream and complain, but they never proposed anything specific or concrete, except to scream that force needs to be used. And when I asked [former Gorbachev opponent and founder of the Communist Party of Russia] Ivan U. Polozkov, with whom I had an interview a few years ago, that while he criticized Gorbachev for the German unification in NATO question, what exactly was he proposing instead. And he said that at that time, nothing. Literally nothing! He said something like, "Well, we didn't have a position in the new Communist Party of Russia, we didn't really develop a position, but nonetheless we knew this was wrong," et cetera.

Palazchenko: There was another position possible. I can tell you, my impression is that in peace time, even Stalin and Khrushchev hesitated to use force against large groups of people. Stalin never hesitated to use force against his political opponents, to start purges and to kill hundreds of thousands of people. But to use force against large masses of people, against demonstrators, even they hesitated, to say nothing of Brezhnev. Look at Czechoslovakia. Was it an easy decision for Brezhnev? And to say now that Gorbachev should have done that, that's just crazy. Unfortunately, there are quite a number of people now, younger people in the Russian political class, among some commentators, who strongly contend that this is what should have been done. But those are people who never were in power, who never will be in power, and who just don't know what it is when you are in government, to even contemplate such decisions.

Demokratizatsiya: Maybe they should also be reminded that in 1987 or 1988, if Gorbachev wanted to preserve those dictators, maybe he could have. But in mid- to late-1989, when they actually fell, this was after the USSR Congress of People's Deputies convened—the deputies applauded the fall of Ceaușescu. The Politburo was weakened; democratization was in full bloom. If Gorbachev want-

ed to intervene, he probably could not have, because the congress would have ousted him.

Palazchenko: Well, maybe yes, maybe no. To me, the most important factor is that for Gorbachev, it was not morally possible, he ethically rejected that. It was a different time and that context made people better. Even in the Politburo, no proposal, no suggestion was made to use force. And that is really amazing. That is the kind of power that Gorbachev emitted at that time.

Demokratizatsiya: When Gorbachev came back from visiting Honecker and informed the Politburo that Honecker's days were numbered, there were no particularly strong arguments or objections of any kind.

Palazchenko: Right. But more generally, even that generation of Soviet leaders—Ligachev, [Politburo member in charge of ideology Vadim] Medvedev for example, and certainly Gorbachev, Shevardnadze, and Yakovlev—who were directly involved with those issues, I think had a sense of fairness. Of course nothing is perfect, but ultimately only fair, that the people of Eastern Europe be given a chance to do what they want to do.

Demokratizatsiya: There is still a debate, and maybe you can help resolve some of the mystery, as to whether Gorbachev simply passively watched those regimes fall, or did he play an active role?

Palazchenko: No, I don't think he had an active role. I really don't think so. He actually said from the start to those leaders when they came to Konstantin Chernenko's funeral, that he believes in his responsibility to our peoples, to our nations, and will not interfere, will not meddle, and each party is responsible to the people of its country. And that is it. He now says that most of those leaders probably thought that he didn't mean it. But he meant it, and so he did not interfere. And ultimately, if he had interfered, let us say, on the side of the revolutionaries, on the side of those who ousted those leaders, it may have been counterproductive. So I think it was very wise certainly not to interfere on the side of the rulers, but also very wise not to interfere in any way in the other direction as well.

Demokratizatsiya: Even more controversially, I have a hypothesis that these revolutions and their swiftness may have even helped Gorbachev in domestic political debates against apparat hardliners that suddenly felt more vulnerable.

Palazchenko: That is possible. On the other hand, it may have been a factor in the putschists acting when they did, because they probably, overall, were so confused that, like [then KGB chairman and coup plotter Vladimir] Kryuchkov said that "something needs to be done now; tomorrow will be too late." And they were demoralized and frustrated, and one can say that what happened so quickly in the Eastern European countries added to their demoralization and to their frustration and pushed them to move against Gorbachev.

These things are so difficult to analyze because they are so difficult to com-

ment on retrospectively. It's very difficult to reconstruct the psychological and emotional makeup of a particular person at that particular time.

Demokratizatsiya: When Gorbachev was already president of the USSR, what organs did he consult with the most on foreign policy issues? The academic debate is that since by then the Politburo was weak and had essentially been deprived of a policy role at the twenty-eighth party congress, and then you had the presidency that had not really formed yet, so the theory goes, Gorbachev was making most decisions with a small kitchen cabinet, so to speak.

Palazchenko: I would say yes, at that time and practically up until the very end, Shevardnadze was influential and he was trusted, but at the same time the people in this kitchen cabinet that were immediately close to him, such as Chernyaev, [Gorbachev advisor and USSR people's deputy Georgy] Shakhnazarov, [former first deputy chairman of the Party's International Department and Gorbachev advisor Vadim]

Zagladin, Medvedev, Yakovlev, up until that moment at the end of 1990 when Shevardnadze resigned, they were the people on which he relied, they were his sounding board on the most important decisions. For example, on January 26th [1990], if I'm not mistaken, they had an inner-circle meeting to discuss German unification and to discuss how to respond to what was happening at an extremely rapid pace. The people who were present I think were those people who I just mentioned, so those were at the time his closest associates.

Falin was still rather close to him at that time, although I must say that like many of our experts on Germany, he was in a way educated and brought up in an anti-German spirit. And it showed, in that there was tremendous suspicion. I thought that was extremely unfortunate. As I wrote in my book, I believe that our Americanists were always in a good way, if not pro-American, but they liked America and they believed that there is a way that we can work together, and that we should work together with America. But at the bottom of the attitude of our Germany experts, there was always more suspicion and mistrust in their way of thinking. I think up until the very end, that there was a danger of German revanchism, and that that danger was real, and they kept writing memoranda and notes to Gorbachev about that until the end. And that was not helpful, although perhaps there was a grain of truth in what they were writing, because my feeling at that time from what I was reading in the various documents that came my way at the foreign ministry and the Kremlin, is that even [West German Chancellor Helmut] Kohl was somewhat scared of the pace of this process and it was because of that that he decided to agree to tremendous acceleration of the EU [European Union]

process, perhaps. But definitely I believe that the fears about German revanchism growing rapidly as the result of German reunification, those fears were—even though perhaps there was a grain of truth in them—overblown, in my opinion. And, again, our experts on Germany were doing their best to exaggerate those fears, which I think is unfortunate.

Now, the people who I think were fully in tune with Gorbachev on issues such as German unity and the sovereignty of central European nations, I would say that among those people would be first of all Chernyaev, Yakovlev, and Shevardnadze. But it's interesting that [Prime Minister Nikolai] Ryzhkov too spoke in Politburo meetings and publicly very much in favor of letting those countries go, of letting them be on their own. Yet again, I think it's a sign of his being very unfair that he never mentions it now, and he never mentions the fact that whatever he or anyone said at that time, it was Gorbachev, as the country's leader, who actually took that blow, who absorbed the weight of the decision.

Demokratizatsiya: Even Ligachev is on record at that time describing the East German regime as bankrupt.

Palazchenko: Absolutely. Though I am not familiar with all that Ligachev wrote afterwards, my impression is that he never actually disassociated himself from those decisions, to allow German unity, to allow East European sovereignty. My impression is that the guy simply has more class than some others.