

'The policy of "transparency" in the Soviet Union. Mr Gorbachev in a crackdown on old taboos ...Le Monde (17 June 1987)

Caption: On 17 June 1987, the French daily newspaper Le Monde speculates on the reality of glasnost, the new policy of transparency in the Soviet Union.

Source: Le Monde. 17.06.1987. Paris: Le Monde. "La politique de "transparence" en Union soviétique M. Gorbatchev à la chasse aux tabous.", auteur:Dhombres, Dominique.

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The policy of ‘transparency’ in the Soviet Union. Mr Gorbachev in a crackdown on old taboos ...

A former deputy foreign trade minister in the USSR and his wife, accused of taking bribes, have just been given lengthy prison sentences. Combating corruption is one aspect of the policy of ‘transparency’ implemented by Mr Gorbachev.

‘The genie is out of the bottle and no one can ever put it back in again.’ That is the optimistic assessment of the official policy of ‘transparency’ (glasnost) by a philosopher who is normally sceptical of the regime’s capacity to evolve. Another philosopher says totally the opposite: ‘What is happening is very strange. There is now incredible freedom of expression. But only Gorbachev and a handful of people around him really encourage this trend. The party is hostile to it and everything could suddenly come to a halt.’

Who are we to believe? Those who see the change as irreversible or those who expect a backlash that will be all the more brutal given that, in the USSR, one of the most sacred taboos of any communist society — the wall of silence surrounding any problem — is being violated every day on a massive scale?

The process began early on with the first tour outside the capital by the new General Secretary. In Leningrad in May 1985, two months after coming to power, Mr Gorbachev adopted a new tone. He spoke to a stunned crowd in terms that in the USSR are normally only whispered.

‘If you want to renovate your apartment and you are not prepared to wait for years, then, just like me, you will have to call upon moonlighters using material stolen from the State,’ he declared, with a smile. Of course he wanted this to stop, and his comment foreshadowed later measures to improve services and legalise small, individual trades. The situation itself has barely altered but people have begun to talk and there is no counting the number of articles about moonlighting that have appeared over the last two years.

There is another, far more political example of ‘transparency.’ A number of émigrés, including Yuri Lyubimov, Vladimir Bukovsky and Leonid Pliouchtch, put their signature to an article in *Le Figaro* in March in which they threw doubt on the extent and even the reality of Mr Gorbachev’s reforms. They confirmed that ‘the Soviet Union is a seriously ill country’, comparing the recent, more informal, elections within the Party to those that took place in South Africa that benefited only whites.

They spoke about the massacre of civilians in Afghanistan and compared the ‘alarming military and patriotic training’ given to Soviet schoolchildren with the ‘conditioning’ of the Hitler Youth. They claimed, rather recklessly, that ‘the publication of this letter in the Soviet press would be the best proof of the sincerity of statements made about transparency’. The editor-in-chief of the *Moscow News*, Igor Yakovlev, took them at their word and published the article in the 25 March edition, along with his own derisive comments about its authors.

There is no counting the number of taboos that have been broken over recent months: drugs, prostitution and AIDS are all now regularly covered in the media. Until now all these things were considered ‘exotic’. It was inconceivable that they might exist in the fatherland of socialism.

Drugs in particular were supposed to affect only capitalist countries, and no one thought of writing that Indian hemp and the poppy plant grow abundantly in Soviet Central Asia. A senior official from the Interior Ministry, Gennady Alexeyev, shattered this myth in an interview with the *Literaturnaya Gazeta* on 20 August 1986. He revealed that the area planted with Indian hemp ‘had grown 25-fold in a quarter-century’ and that Soviet drug addicts had no need to get their supplies from abroad.

Drugs and prostitution

On 6 January, *Pravda* provided national statistics. According to the Party daily, the number of drug addicts has been growing steadily for five years. Forty-six thousand of them have been registered by the police and, in 1986 alone, three hundred dealers were arrested.

There has been a flood of reports. In the *Moscow Evening News* of 5 September 1986, a young drug addict told in great detail how she had begun to inject morphine at the age of 15 in a basement corridor inside the National Hotel, in the heart of Moscow. She was part of a gang of youngsters from respectable families. 'In summer we travelled all over the country, to Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Crimea.' Newspapers have started to describe this desperate search for hemp and poppy plants by young city-dwellers along the highways of Central Asia. *Sovetskaya Rossiya* spoke of how a certain Troitski from Lyuberezh, who was suspected of murder and needed a large sum of money to pay for a good lawyer (maybe a good judge?), sent two 'of his girlfriends' to fetch some 'pot' from Central Asia. On their return his girlfriends were arrested as soon as they got off the plane ...

Two reports published last November in *Moscow Komsomolets* did similar investigative journalism about prostitution. They threw light on the system for recycling hard currency obtained from foreign tourists. At \$100 a time, the tidy sums obtained are used to buy clothes or scarce products in 'hard-currency' shops. These goods are then sold off at high prices on the black market by dealers, who also pimp for these women. The publication of these two articles caused a sensation in Moscow. The 'ladies of the night' immediately vanished from around the Arbat restaurant and the big hotels in the centre, particularly the US-built International. They have since returned but they are fewer in number and more discreet.

Such squalid subjects are not mentioned on television. But the evening news is a little less stiff-necked and variety shows with Soviet rock groups are now commonplace. The cover of the April edition of the magazine *Sovetskaya Ekran* showed a leather-clad punk singer with outrageous make-up.

The first opinion polls

Amongst the many examples of 'transparency' we could cite the ending of the jamming of Russian language broadcasts from the BBC and the Voice of America (while Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty are still being jammed); the appearance of opinion polls such as the one conducted in May by the Institute of Sociological Studies, part of the Academy of Sciences, which showed that, unlike Mr Gorbachev, 48 % of Soviets do not believe that one day it will be possible to entirely eliminate nuclear weapons; or the reopening to the public of the Novodevichy Cemetery, which had been closed under Brezhnev because of the persistent and strange tributes at the tomb of Nikita Khrushchev.

One of the most ridiculous aspects of censorship has at last almost disappeared. Natural and man-made disasters now have the right to exist in the USSR. That was the case, after some initial hesitation, with the Chernobyl accident. The sinking last August in the Black Sea of the Admiral Nakhimov, with 400 fatalities, was also widely broadcast. It should be recalled that under Brezhnev the authorities were even reluctant to admit that earthquakes had taken place.

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