Doctoral School of International Relations and Political Science

THESIS BOOKLET

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Structural and Conjunctural Factors of Gorbachev's Concessionary Policies vis-à-vis East Central Europe and the Baltic Republics

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Contents

1. Research background and justification of the topic

Gorbachev's domestic and foreign policy is an issue that still raises contradictory responses from scholars and politicians. The democratization of the USSR and the liberalization of Soviet foreign policy became a double-edged sword for the Soviet Union. It catalyzed secessionist movements' (re)activation; on the other hand, inter-ethnic conflicts in the USSR further destabilized the eroding national economy and inflamed Gorbachev's domestic foes in the Kremlin and elsewhere.

The reason why the contradictory interpretations of the motives and intentions of Gorbachev's policies exist is the fact that Gorbachev's strategy failed. In the conditions of the factual inexistence of the ends Gorbachev's team hoped to achieve, the debate over Gorbachev's policies is somewhat similar to anticipating where the second endpoint of the line segment could have been when we can only tell where the first one is.

One more reason for this misunderstanding is the relative newness of the 1985-1991 period. Accurate historical analysis needs a distance, a particular gap between a researcher and developments under investigation. If this gap becomes too distant or too narrow, the efficient interconnection between a historian and a period under investigation vanishes.

Almost thirty years have passed since the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union. We think that now is when a researcher has an opportunity to catch the golden ratio between him/her and the 1985-1991 period. Newly available archival sources are released in Russia and worldwide, and besides, a number of direct eyewitnesses and officials personally involved in shaping international politics between 1985-1991 is luckily

alive. A historian cannot even think of a better time to investigate the developments of the Gorbachev era – this excellent opportunity became our central stimulus while deciding the topic for our study.

We are particularly interested in Gorbachev's policies vis-à-vis East Central Europe and the Baltic republics, namely, the Kremlin's gradual retreat and systematic loosening of Soviet control over these regions. We would like to understand the basis of institutional transformations in the Kremlin by reconstructing the historical reality in which the respected policies were developed and implemented. What factors influenced the decision-makers in Moscow? Why did they decide to avert the USSR's domestic and foreign orienteers radically and chose to follow the path that seemed like ideological and procedural heresy for the Kremlin? What was the strategy that Gorbachev's team followed? These are the questions we have been puzzled by.

We think that providing answers to the questions mentioned above, will help a reader reconstruct the Gorbachev historical period. Besides, the multi-factor investigation of the end of the Soviet Union period is not merely significant for the specific field of historical study. It has its policy relevance for the ongoing developments in Eastern Europe.

Gorbachev's policies vis-à-vis East Central Europe and the Baltic republics appeared to be the opening of the Kremlin's knot in Eastern Europe – the process still keeps on going as NATO enlarges in former communist space. After German reunification and the former GDR's subsequent integration into NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization enlarged five times. North Macedonia became NATO's newest member in March 2020. Besides, Bosnia and Herzegovina got the Membership Action Plan in 2018. On the other hand, we see Moscow's reaction, which was demonstrated by the 2008

Russo-Georgian War and the ongoing war in Ukraine. President Putin's leadership wants to make it clear for everyone that further entrance of NATO into the former Soviet space will end up in a tremendous conflict.

In contrast, we see Secretary General Stoltenberg's declarations that Ukraine and Georgia will become NATO members one day. As it seems, George Kennan's sharp prognosis in 1998, about the risks of proliferation of a new Cold War after the Senate ratified NATO's fourth enlargement, turned out to be true (Friedman, T., 1998). In several spots of its eastern neighborhood, the European continent experiences the inexistence of the post-Cold War *modus vivendi*, which turns the states into a bone of contention between the West and Russia (Tchanturia, 2019b, pp. 96-97). The post-Cold War *status quo*, which was inscribed in the spirit of East-West negotiations during 1989-1991, has been disturbed since the 1999 NATO enlargement. Therefore, we think that sometime in the future, the current East-West relationship in the region will require a signature of an international treaty, which will formally fix the new balance of power. When this happens, the emphasis of these negotiations will be *inter alia* on East-West relations during the Gorbachev era.

2. Methodology

The theoretical tradition of historical institutionalism most perfectly suits the objectives of our study and how we understand the historical process in general. Therefore, the methodological approach of the study is based on this tradition.

According to historical institutionalism, timing and sequence play a decisive role in shaping decision-making. Due to the influence of unpredictability, inflexibility (it becomes harder to reverse a course as time passes), non-ergodicity (accidental occasions may have a long-term effect), and inefficiencies (for passed alternatives might have been more useful) on the process of decision making, a researcher, while explaining the process of institutional transformation, should take into consideration the phenomenon of path dependence and contingency.

Since the calculations of decision-makers and indigenous or exogenous constraints under which they craft and implement their policies may change over time, the most efficient approach to reconstruct the historical reality that surrounds an institutional change is based on considering the interplay of multiple factors and the way they influence the process of decision making. Namely, the historical institutionalist approach efficiently captures "when and how historical processes shape political outcomes" (Fioretos, 2011, p. 369). The pieces by Pierson (2004), Streeck and Thelen (eds.) (2005), Mahoney and Thelen (2009), Thelen (1999), and Sanders (2006) are especially crucial for understanding the historical institutionalist theoretical tradition.

Our methodological approach considers the general idea of path dependence as an essential tool for explaining the decision-making process during institutional change. The concept of path dependence is based on the assumption that the decisions made during an earlier period determine future choices of decision-makers.

Our research question is: what factors influenced Gorbachev's decision to give up the Kremlin's control on East Central Europe and the Baltic republics? Our primary assumption is that Gorbachev's decision was influenced by a complex and

sometimes unexpected interplay of structural and conjunctural factors that ultimately determined the timing and sequence of Gorbachev's policies.

The particular methodological approach which inspired our study is portrayed in Dragoş Petrescu's *Entangled Revolutions: The Breakdown of Communist Regimes in East-Central Europe* (Petrescu, 2014). Petrescu elaborated his framework based on Ole Nørgaard and Steven L. Sampson's 1984 pioneering work *Poland's Crisis and East European Socialism* (Nørgaard and Sampson, 1984). Nørgaard and Sampson argue that structural, conjunctural, and nation-specific factors influenced Poland's crisis and catalyzed Solidarity's emergence.

Petrescu has further refined Nørgaard and Sampson's methodological approach and divided structural factors into the two sub-groups of *economic failure* and *ideological decay*. In economic failure, Petrescu supposes "the perceived failure of state socialism to offer a living standard similar to that of the more advanced Western societies." Ideological decay refers to "overall erosion of the revolutionary ideology [and] fading away of the utopian goal of building a radically new, classless society" (Petrescu, 2014, pp. 30-34). According to Petrescu, conjunctural factors also have two main dimensions – internal and external. Whereas *internal conjunctural factors* refer to natural catastrophes and disasters inside the state, *external conjunctural factors* stand for conjunctural influences from outside of borders, realized among other things by the foreign policy instruments of foreign states or institutions (Petrescu, 2014, p. 36).

We adopted Petrescu's methodological framework and made some modifications to make it suitable for our study. All components are allocated in two main groups: *structural* and *conjunctural factors*.

Under structural factors, we enlisted the sub-groups of *economic failure* and *ideological decay*. In contrast with Petrescu's definition of *economic failure*, which supposes a "perceived failure" of the statist economy as its main feature, we suggest that the Kremlin's decision to avert the traditional developmental path of the Soviet economy and switch to *perestroika* occurred due to the "absolute failure" of the state economy. The perceived failure of state socialism also had a significant role. However, the perceived failure followed the real failure, and the leaders in the Kremlin were the first to notice that the Soviet economy was declining in its absolute sense.

We somewhat modified the original category of *ideological decay*, defining it as an erosion of the ideology of one particular type of Soviet regime. Namely, traditional coercive methods of problem-solving became obsolete for the new leadership. The traditional Soviet ideology in politics had little in common with the communist original ideals. The Kremlin's central ideology that guided its domestic and foreign policy was its general dependence on hard power - this was the fundamental feature of Soviet ideology that guided its policies.

In contrast, communism was a general hypothetical umbrella for international propaganda that supposed the transfer of state socialism and democratic centralism abroad. The feature of imposing or preserving communism by hard power became obsolete for Gorbachev's leadership. They realized that this imperial ideology was no longer viable to defend the fundamental interests of the Soviet Union. Therefore, we define *ideological decay* as the erosion of the traditional Soviet ideology in the eyes of the Kremlin's new leadership, not the overall erosion of communism. In that sense, under the ideological decay sub-group, we incorporated two main elements – the "erosion of traditional Soviet ideology" and the

"subsequent attempt of its transformation" by the new regime's new political culture.

The phenomenon of contingency played a significant role in shaping internal and external conjuncture that surrounded Gorbachev's institutional transformations. Under *internal conjuncture*, we suppose the combination of all domestic developments in the Soviet Union, which were unforeseen by the Soviet leadership and further embittered the domestic crisis in the country. These developments contributed to the Kremlin's leniency towards its Cold War-time enemies and inspired Soviet decision makers to liberalize their foreign policy. Our definition of *external conjunctural factors* implies all patterns of external conjuncture that embittered the Kremlin's crisis at home and contributed to the emergence of Gorbachev's liberal policy vis-à-vis East Central Europe and the Baltic republics later.

To portray the sequential progress of the Kremlin's retreat from East Central Europe and the Baltic republics we have identified four main phases: verbal recognition, *de-facto* recognition, *de-jure* recognition of German reunification, and *de-jure* recognition of the Baltic republics. The verbal recognition phase implies the period when Gorbachev was orally announcing the revocation of the Brezhnev Doctrine. This phase started as early as March 1985, from Chernenko's funeral, and lasted until August-September 1989. In the summer of 1989, the one-party rule finally came to an end, and a non-communist government was elected in Poland. The Kremlin's tranquil reaction to the Polish developments *de-facto* confirmed that Gorbachev was honest in his assurances.

It should be noted that until June 1988 (until the XIXth All-Union Conference of the CPSU), Gorbachev's verbal assurances had a certain kind of purposeful ambiguity – a phenomenon to which Békés refers as floating the Brezhnev

Doctrine; we refer to it as *managed ambiguity*. Therefore, managed ambiguity was the only means to avert the instant disintegration of the established institutional structures. It implied that Gorbachev never stated categorically that the "Soviet Union would not interfere with an ally's domestic affairs should the political transition, *horribile dictu*, result in the total abandonment of socialism and the restoration of parliamentary democracy" (Békés, 2002, p. 243). On the XIXth All-Union Conference of the CPSU, this feature in Gorbachev's discourse disappeared as he "without any preliminary elaboration declared that any nation had the right to choose its social-economic system" (Békés, 2002, p. 242).

The *de-facto* recognition phase implies that the Kremlin had finally (*de-facto*) revoked the infamous Brezhnev Doctrine. This phase started from August-September 1989 and lasted until the very end of the Soviet Union; however, the actual process, during which the limit of the Kremlin's tolerance was tested in East Central Europe, lasted until late December 1989, when Ceaușescu's rule in Romania collapsed. The phase of *de-jure* recognition of German reunification and the former GDR's integration to NATO started from 13 February 1990, when the Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany was drafted (signed on 12 September 1990). It ended on 3 October 1990, when Germany was reunified, and the former GDR joined the FRG and NATO. The *de-jure* recognition of the Baltic republics was not a "phase" by classical sense but rather an episode that occurred on 6 September 1991, when the USSR *de-jure* recognized the Baltic republics' independence.

3. Research findings

We portrayed how the complex and sometimes unexpected interplay of structural and conjunctural factors determined the Kremlin's revocation of the Brezhnev Doctrine and conditioned Moscow's gradual retreat from East Central Europe and the Baltic republics.

Our study's primary added value is utilizing up to 16 000 pages-long Russian language primary sources and integrating the findings into the existing international scholarship. Thoroughly compiled in-text references to archival sources with the page numbers indicated allows the reader to quickly revisit quoted and cited passages in original archival materials and utilize the findings of our study for own purposes.

The main prism through which we explain Moscow's gradual retreat from East Central Europe and the Baltic republics is Gorbachev's strive for the Soviet self-survival. The growing costs of the Soviet imperial overstretch increasingly hindered the already eroding national economy and put the existence of the whole state under serious jeopardy.

Path dependency played a decisive role in Gorbachev's new policy crafting. He tried to imitate Vladimir Lenin's Brest-Litovsk treaty strategy and compromise Soviet peripheral territories to save the imperial center. Initially, the Kremlin liberalized its' discourse. Although Gorbachev's rhetoric was in many ways ambiguous, it became apparent that leaders in Moscow wanted to signal the whole world that the USSR was on its way to the revocation of the Brezhnev Doctrine. Verbal assurances were followed by the Kremlin's inert reaction to the 1989 East European revolutions. One year later, Moscow officially accepted the reunification of Germany and the former GDR's integration to NATO. One more year later, the Kremlin *de-jure* recognized the Baltic independence. There is

enough basis for arguing that Gorbachev might have been ready to compromise the Kremlin's dominance not only in East Central Europe and the Baltic republics but also in the South Caucasus and Moldova.

Gorbachev's *quid pro quo* was settling all issues in contention with the West and safeguarding Western support for successfully implementing Soviet domestic reforms. Accordingly, the Kremlin's liberalization policies had very pragmatic reasons, and they were not necessarily derived from Gorbachev's unconditional strive for world peace and international humanism.

Gorbachev's response to the growing structural problems in the country was his attempt to liberalize and somewhat recreate the national economy by *perestroika* and transform increasingly eroding Soviet ideology by introducing *glasnost* and *new thinking*. Cardinal sociopolitical shift from the traditional Soviet monolithism to the ideological and political pluralism was supposed to initiate the new generation's "cleansing from the Bolshevik morality" and the transformation of the traditional forms of the Soviet social capital to a European type. The main unforeseen problem in this regard became the fact that "seemingly neutralized and blocked totalitarian structures still exist[ed] in the social and mental space," which resulted in the radicalization of intra-national and intra-ethnic relations (Mamardashvili, 2011, p. 245).

Soviet society appeared not to be ready to accept the heresy of pluralistic freedom. Its introduction resulted in the sudden reactivation of radical ideas that had their roots in Stalinist nationalism (Maisuradze, 2019, p. 80-81). Once the popular fronts in the Union republics sensed the weakening of the Kremlin "claws," their primary goal became mobilizing the local nationalist discourse and acquiring independence from the Kremlin.

Besides the ideological immaturity of the Soviet society to accept the heresy of pluralistic freedom, "the perceived failure of state socialism to offer a living standard similar to that of the more advanced Western societies" played a decisive role too (Petrescu, 2014, pp. 30-34). The enormously large Soviet economic organism's liberalization could not have happened painlessly, especially during the short deadlines. Most Soviet and Western economists agreed that a radical reform of the Soviet economy was impossible without experiencing inflation and unemployment on very significant scales (Gorbachev, 2011c, p. 68).

Gorbachev's leadership too, in many ways, appeared not to be ready to stay faithful to the new principles it advocated. Gorbachev's new ideology was revoking "the ends justify the means" classical principle. However, during some episodes, when the new path's implementation seemed impossible, the leadership in the Kremlin tried to make some painful corrections by coercive measures.

In many ways, the growing economic crisis in the USSR contributed to revoking the Kremlin's imperial ambitions. Besides, the "glorious" imperial inheritance from the past regimes became a heavy burden to bear in the mid-1980s. Broad military presence worldwide and colossal prices of the arms race became a certain kind of black hole for the Soviet budget, draining the resources needed for the Soviet economy's reinvigoration. The prices of maintaining the USSR's empire in East Central Europe also seemed massive. Fixed friendly prices on Soviet natural resources seemed not to serve the Kremlin's best interests now. Moscow preferred to have regular international price buyers of its natural resources worldwide, instead of the group of allied countries around, who consumed its resources at relatively low prices. One more factor contributing to increasing the Kremlin's economic vulnerability was the hawkish politics pursued by President

Reagan. His Strategic Defense Initiative exposed the Kremlin's inability to compete for the super-power status and embittered Moscow's thirst for arms reductions.

Had the Kremlin not been puzzled by the increasing problems of the eroding national economy, it is less likely that it would have accepted to retreat from its Western peripheries, especially from the Baltic region. The very fact that the Soviet budget was on the brink of total bankruptcy by September 1991 tempted Gorbachev to accept and recognize the Baltic independence. In this manner, he tried not to put under jeopardy the prospective economic aid from the West. The Western leadership was signaling Moscow that the price of their new friendship was the Kremlin's adaptation to the non-coercive measures home and abroad. Particular emphasis besides East Central Europe was put on the Baltic republics – a region, the annexation of which was never officially recognized by the West.

Gorbachev did not have many choices to follow, and besides, the growing economic crisis was not the only problem his leadership faced. Nationalism was on its rise too. Apart from the domestic factors of its aggravation, the significant stimulus was injected by nationalism-emboldening Western media, émigrés in the West, the snowballing effect from the 1989 revolutions, and the influences from the Roman Catholic Church and, to a minor extent, from the Islamic Republic of Iran.

On the other hand, world market prices of crude oil dropped dramatically – the Soviet budget was losing up to 40 percent of its revenues (Gorbachev, 2018, p. 113). Alongside the gradual decrease of the USSR's solvency, private creditors in the West became increasingly risk-sensitive, ultimately lowering their lending to the Soviet Union. Accordingly, the only viable option the Kremlin had, was to count on assistance from the

Western governments and implement a foreign policy, which matched with the political interests of the Western states.

The main prism through which we can objectively evaluate and explain the ongoing regional conflicts in post-Soviet Eastern Europe is the increasing expansion of NATO in the former communist space. Moscow claims that "the spirit of the statements and assurances" made in 1989-1990 by the Westerners, which supposed not disturbing the Kremlin's security interests in Eastern Europe, has been violated. Americans made no binding promises to the Kremlin in 1989-1990 concerning the no-NATO-enlargement to the East beyond the former GDR. The verbal promises they made concerned Bush's and Gorbachev's leadership only. However, Moscow's present leadership feels that the Kremlin's security interests became a victim of diplomatic manipulation and dishonesty. Putin's policy signals the Western capitals' leadership that the post-Cold War red lines between NATO and the Kremlin should not go further beyond the former Soviet Union border. The violation of this frontier will end up in a military conflict with Russia. This very circumstance makes Ukraine's, Georgia's, or Moldova's NATO membership a sufficiently dangerous gambit.

We think that two policy-relevant conclusions can be derived from our research findings:

1. When global and regional powers appear in a crisis that puts at stake their existence, in a very pragmatic manner, they accept all necessary concessions for the sake of saving the imperial center - thus ensuring their self-survival. In that sense, the "divide and rule" classical principle is not the only one for great powers, but we can argue that a "make concessions and rule the rest" principle was also used in certain historical situations. Although Gorbachev was unlucky with

the *make a concession and rule the rest* strategy, Vladimir Lenin accomplished it very successfully at the beginning of the XXth century. Moreover, the emergence of the Russian Federation on the ruins of the Soviet Union with no territorial losses, given that during the final years of Gorbachev's leadership, several autonomous entities in the RSFSR (like Chechnya, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, and Yakutia) had separatist demands (Tchanturia, 2019a, p. 304) and Gorbachev was also negotiating the return of the Kuril Islands to Japan, indicates that in exchange for a concession of its control on the Union republics, the Kremlin preserved the very heart of its imperial center.

Besides, relatively small players in world politics can also learn something from the *make a concession and rule the rest* strategy, especially the post-Soviet states with the frozen and/or active regional conflicts on their territories. The governments and their respective populations in Kyiv, Tbilisi, and elsewhere in the post-Soviet Eastern Europe should arm themselves with pragmatic policies and, to some extent, get ready to recognize the interests of the breakaway entities and the Russian Federation for ensuring their efficient rule on the rest of their territory (Tchanturia, 2019b, p. 106).

2. The democratization of a multi-ethnic totalitarian state is a task with paramount difficulty. In many ways, introducing new freedoms can generate radicalization of social discourse and bring the old precipitated discontent to the surface of the political stage. In these circumstances, it is questionable whether the internal strength and cohesion of a state are strong enough to sustain this kind of series of frustrations and setbacks.

Therefore, there is a reasonable risk that a totalitarian multi-ethnic state's democratization can create the emotional and doctrinaire political argument which might paralyze political life and, ultimately, an entire regime. Considering the circumstances mentioned above, the democratization of the People's Republic of China bears more risks than prospects, and therefore the Communist Party of China abstains from its implementation.

The similar logic applies to the democratization of Russia. Putin's leadership is seemingly aware of the risks that resuming Gorbachev's policies might bring. We think that path dependency plays a vital role here. The Kremlin's promotion of the general democratization process can quickly put Putin's leadership and the territorial integrity of the whole federation in serious jeopardy.

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