Jeffrey Sachs: Gorbachev and the Struggle for Democracy

Last week the world mourned and celebrated the life of Vaclav Havel, whose philosophy of living in truth brought freedom to his people and brought hope everywhere. This week we should celebrate another great revolutionary and Democrat, perhaps the world’s greatest but least celebrated statesman. In recent days, former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, now 80 years old, has bravely called upon the Russian Government to step down in the wake of rigged Parliamentary elections. In doing so, Gorbachev continues his remarkable and history-shaping campaign for democracy in Russia and around the world.

While democracy has taken firm hold in the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe following the collapse of communism in 1989, the same has not occurred in Russia and many of the other successor states of the former Soviet Union. Gorbachev has consistently denounced Russia’s slide back to one-party, even one-man rule, as Russian strong man Vladimir Putin has increasingly clamped down on Russia’s nascent democratic institutions in politics, the media, academia, and the regions.

Gorbachev is Russia’s leading Democrat, yet he is widely reviled inside Russia, neglected in the United States, and unknown to youth around the world. The unheralded fact is that Gorbachev’s commitment to democracy can be felt in all parts of today’s world. He was vital not only to the peaceful re-democratization of Havel’s Central Europe after 1989, but also to the spread of democracy within Africa and Asia during the past two decades. This month Gorbachev joins his countrymen in fighting for Russian democracy.

Gorbachev’s personal fate was to become democratic leader of the world’s least democratic institution, the Soviet Communist Party. He was elevated to power by the Party leadership in 1985 to breathe new dynamism into the rapidly collapsing Soviet economy. Yet the rigidities and lies of the Soviet economic and political system proved to be largely impervious to change, culminating in the complete collapse of the Soviet state and economy in 1991.

During his six years of rule, Gorbachev was intent on renovating Soviet socialism through peaceful and democratic means. The problem, of course, was that the Soviet economy was a deranged system that directed people and resources through state commands, threats, and the force of the Gulag. Yet Gorbachev relentlessly tried to reform the system not through commands but through persuasion and appeals to truth and cooperation.

Without the terror and threats, Soviet central planning collapsed and the economy descended into massive shortages, collapsed production, and by 1991 an extreme financial crisis. The dire outcomes proved De Tocqueville’s famous maxim that «the most dangerous moment for a bad government is when it begins to reform itself.» Gorbachev was increasingly despised inside Russia because of the deteriorating economic conditions even as he was lifting the long-standing yoke of political oppression from his countrymen. Eventually he stepped down from power in December 1991 as the Soviet Union itself was dissolved, giving way to 15 successor countries.

I watched Gorbachev’s actions up close during this historic period. During 1989-91, I was a senior economic advisor to several post-communist governments in Central and Eastern Europe. In country after country, it was Gorbachev himself who told
his communist counterparts that their era of poli-
tical monopoly was over, and that it was time for
them to make room for the democratic forces of
Europe. In Poland, for example, Gorbachev directly
intervened in the summer of 1989 on behalf of the
Solidarity opposition movement, telling Poland’s
communist leader Wojciech Jaruzelski that it was
time to for the communist regime to share power
with the Solidarity opposition. One month later, Po-
land’s first post-communist Premier since World
War II came to power.

Similar events transpired throughout the Soviet
city empire and beyond. Gorbachev repeatedly coaxed
democratic change throughout Soviet-dominated
Central and Eastern Europe and throughout the So-
viet spheres of influence in Africa and Asia. Gor-
bachev’s openness and reforms also had a ricochet
effect of undermining extreme right-wing regimes
around the world, whose raison d’etre had been
their opposition to Soviet communism. In this way,
Gorbachev’s democratic reforms weakened the
anti-communist racist regime in South Africa, and
bolstered Nelson Mandela’s democratic revolution
in South Africa.

In the U.S., Ronald Reagan is generally given credit
for victory in the Cold War. Gorbachev is mentioned,
if at all, for succumbing to the arms-race pressures
created by Reagan. Yet the key to the peaceful end of
the Cold War was not the 1980s arms race or even
America’s widening technological superiority. In
«normal» circumstances, the Soviet decline might
have given rise to violence and the adventurism of
war. The Soviet Union disbanded voluntarily des-
pite tens of thousands of nuclear warheads. While
countless heroic individuals in the Soviet Union va-
liantly gave their lives for this outcome, Gorbachev’s
personal commitment to peace and democracy was
decisive. Moral leadership caused the peaceful end
of an immoral system.

The West could have done much more to help Gor-
bachev’s democratic reforms. In 1990-91, Gorbachev
closely watched Poland’s successful economic re-
forms and urged the West to support similar mea-
sures in the Soviet Union. Yet when Gorbachev
appealed for Western assistance of the kind being
offered to Poland, President Bush Sr. and his disas-
trous Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney comple-
tely rebuffed Gorbachev. A year later, Bill Clinton
similarly turned his back on Boris Yeltsin, by then
President of an independent Russia. Without Wes-
tern financial assistance, and with Russia’s own
deeply divided politics and disastrous economic
conditions, Russia’s nascent democratic reforms
were set back by chaos and corruption.

Russia has suffered from authoritarian rule for
centuries, so Russia’s transition to democracy was
bound to be an epic challenge, and so it has pro-
ved to be. Today’s brave young people protesting
on the streets of Moscow and other Russian cities
are making the strongest claim in Russia’s modern
history for true democratic rule. Russia’s current
regime is dug in, but the power of youth, massed in
protest, will eventually prevail. Whether the protes-
ters recognize it or not, their coming achievements
will build on the decisive contributions of Russia’s
greatest living statesmen, Mikhail Gorbachev.

Follow Jeffrey Sachs on Twitter: www.twitter.com/
JeffDSachs