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A LONG ECHO OF 1991: SOCIAL MEANING OF COUNTRY'S DISASTER

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Abstract. *The article deals with social meaning of the collapse of the USSR (seen as a result of the actions of the Soviet Nomenklatura) in context of the struggle between socialist and capitalist world-systems. The social structure of Soviet society, according to the theory of Yu.V. Yaremenko, had a pyramidal structure and consisted of four strata-estates. The bureaucratic nomenclature that made up the ruling class, unlike other strata, did not have opportunities for internal vertical growth and was focused on integration into Western society. This ruling class, despite sluggish resistance of other social groups, destroyed society and the state altogether. A new ruling class took shape mainly due to the denationalization of property and through large-scale redistribution of social wealth, complemented with drop in production and consumption, rather than their growth. In a geopolitical sense, the collapse of the global socialist system (1989) and subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union (1991) meant complete victory of the world capitalist system at a particular historical moment. From that moment on, the continuing absorption of the fragments of the defeated system by the winning system began. Collapse of the USSR in 1991 is of fundamental practical importance for contemporary Russia. First, because the nomenclature and the administrative-command system have re-formed in the country, and, second, because victorious global capitalist system has begun to directly absorb Russia, as the last remaining large fragment of the defeated system. Such absorption became possible either due to the fragmentation of the country, or due to its transformation into the periphery of the developed capitalist world. This, in turn, presupposes an isolation of the country and keeping it in a state of technological and economic backwardness. The direction of further global development fundamentally depends on Russia's ability to withstand this geopolitical struggle.*

Keywords: *collapse of the USSR • putsch of 1991 • contemporary Russia • perestroika • Gaidar's reforms • ruling class • nomenclature*

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The rapid collapse of the USSR is an atypical historical event which gives motives to raise many questions. Kissinger, discussing the effect of the collapse of the USSR, wrote that no great power has ever disintegrated so completely and so quickly without a war¹. For three decades, an extensive historiography of the surprising catastrophe of 1991 has been accumulated, in which there is an analysis of its external and internal, objective and subjective causes and factors. There are also many papers containing an overview of the available versions and concepts [Korshunov, Kochetkova, 2014].

This article contains overthinks of the author on a meaning and consequences of the events of 1991, the analysis of which he was engaged in, working at that time as the head of the political analysis and forecast sector in the structure of the CPSU Central Committee, as well as in the subsequent thirty years. The article is based on the author's personal observations and conversations with a large number of direct participants in the events, analysts and researchers.

¹ Melnik G. Was it possible to rescue USSR? // *Parlament newspaper*. 2016. 22 November.

On the eve of perestroika. The author formulated a thesis about the emergence of capitulation moods in Soviet society, relatively speaking, after 1968 almost 30 years ago. These sentiments covered, although not evenly, almost all groups of the population. "In the 1970s and 1980s, a vague feeling was emerging in society that the country was playing a historical competition with the West. There was in almost all social strata a mood of psychological surrender. In different social groups, they acquired different forms, but their general resultant was the affirming opinion that "there", "they" are better. And movies, and music, and clothes are better there, and they have more freedom.

The official ideology tried to resist such attitudes, but the Soviet state did it in stale and official manner. The *ethnos* was psychologically broken, alienation from everything of its all native roots grew, the national idea was lost, the life philosophy of people degenerated into banal consumerism, into a blind passion to live, because life is short" [Semenov, 1993: 26].

The growing technological lag of the USSR from the advanced countries of the West was particularly acutely felt in the 1970s and early 1980s. Scientific and engineering specialists clearly saw that the scientific and technical revolution, on which great hopes were pinned, did not actually take place in the USSR. The only exception was the military-industrial complex. Many representatives of the scientific and management communities expressed concern about the problems that need to be solved. It was clearly realized that reforms were needed. But then there was a discussion mainly about individual problems and local reforms. It seemed that the development of socialist society as a whole, its individual spheres and institutions is possible due to improvement, without a radical change in the principles of the organization of their life activities.

Since the mid-1980s, the nature of the discussion of the problems of society's development has changed radically, people began to talk about the need for a comprehensive reform as a deep systemic transformation. Constructive ideas, however, were few, instead of constructiveness, radicalism was proposed. The mind of a purposeful systemic reform was already retreating under the pressure of the madness of a radical revolution.

Reform in its essence is a creative, not a destructive action; the change of the system in the direction of its development, not degradation; the change is holistic, not fragmented and chaotic. But since 1987, even the leadership of the Communist party in the person of Mikhail Gorbachev has started talking about "perestroika" not as a reform, but as a "revolutionary" transformation of socialist society. Mikhail Gorbachev's book "Perestroika for our Country and for the Whole World" stated: "It is very important not to sit too long" at the start, to overcome the lag, to break out of the quagmire of conservatism, to break the inertia of stagnation. This cannot be done evolutionarily with the help of a timid, creeping reform" [Gorbachev, 1987: 48]. Its author may have believed that **stereotype** used by him is a system of real measures would allow to carry out the transformation of society. A significant part of society at that time already thought wider and saw further perspective.

In the second half of the 1980s, the idea of a deep transformation of society and building it on the basis of the principles of the market economy and democracy was vigorously discussed in the intellectual segments of the Soviet society. The ideology of the market economy and democracy was the essence of the reformist ideology developed by the Soviet intelligentsia in collaboration with a part of the party nomenclature. At the same time, the market economy and democracy were symbols and metaphors rather than constructive goals, and "the very demand for transition to the market was moral, not economic in its origins" [Yaremenko, 1998: 36]. The society was dominated by the idea that the market and democracy, either in the conditions of renewed socialism (communists), or instead of socialism (opposition intelligentsia), would allow the country to overcome a critically dangerous gap that was acutely felt between developed countries of the West and Russia.

The great lag of the country in technological development was recognized even by the official ideology. So, in 1989 Mikhail Gorbachev in one of his articles wrote that in years "stagnation" and "missed opportunities" in the USSR rulers "underestimated the value of a revolutionary changes in science and technology and did not make practical steps in this direction,

although much has been said about the necessity of a connection of the achievements of scientific and technological revolution and the newest stage of the advanced socialism. As a result, in general civilizational terms, in a number of important spheres and directions, we remained in the past technological era, and the Western countries moved to another era, this is the era of high technologies, fundamentally new interrelations of science and production, new forms of life support for people, up to everyday life" [Gorbachev, 1989: 10]. At the same time, the roots of the lag were seen (depending on the ideological platform of the observer) either in the technological basis of society, low scientific and technical the level of production, the missed scientific and technological revolution, or in the economic and political system, in socialism and communist ideology. The supporters of the ideas of the market economy and democracy were extremely heterogeneous in composition, and their temporary ideological unity was extremely unstable, situational and even illusory. A kind of manifesto of this unstable eclectic ideology of the market-democratic reform of Soviet society reflected in the collection of articles "Another way is not given" [1988]. Already by the beginning of 1989 during the First Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR this unity collapsed and two strategies of market – democratic reforms were clearly outlined. One considered the market economy and democracy as a way of systemic transformation of socialism, the another one considered them as an alternative to socialism, a way to get rid of it. The struggle of these strategies ended in 1991 with the collapse of the USSR and socialism. Unlike the PRC, the second strategy prevailed in Russia.

"Perestroika" as a mechanism of self-destruction. Perestroika turned out to be not a reform of an existing system, but a mechanism of its self-destruction, a method of suicide. This applies to society as a whole, and to its individual spheres, in particular to science, the example of which clearly shows that during the years of perestroika the reform of science did not take place, as same as, this did not take place in the post – Soviet period [Semenov, 2021]). It was not those actions and steps that could constructively transform the inefficient, but still capable national scientific and technological complex and ensure its controlled transition to a new state that dominated, but actions in the spirit of "dismantling" and "breaking", only damaging and undermining previous, albeit outdated, but integral structure. The same way took place in a restructuring the Soviet society as a whole.

Of course, the question stays: why did everything happen exactly this way? According to the overwhelming majority of researchers, perestroika involuntarily, almost accidentally, launched the process of disorganization and self-destruction of society. "Perestroika itself," according to economist Yu.V. Yaremenko, "at first did not portend anything unexpected, it was just another ideological campaign. But this campaign has led to some political shifts that have made the situation unmanageable. They showed to what extent everything is rotten" [Yaremenko, 1998: 116].

I will not support the opinion about the initially purely ideological nature of perestroika, while agreeing with the state of the loss of manageability as a key factor in the process of destruction of society. I think that initially it was a process of dismantling the political system. In 1990–1991, the author had an opportunity to communicate with a number of people from the state's leadership. According to one of the testimonies, "in their circle" the leaders (Mikhail Gorbachev, A.N. Yakovlev, E.A. Shevardnadze, V.A. Medvedev) said that "the main task is to eliminate the autocracy of the CPSU". It was the successful solution of this problem in 1990, which led to the destruction of the political system and the loss of manageability, and in the final result was the collapse of the entire structure of society and the destruction of the state in 1991.

Nomenclature. Noting the growing technological and economic lag of the country from the most developed countries of the world, as well as the mass disillusionment of the Soviet people in the existing order and the mass psychological capitulation to the West, I will highlight the role of the Soviet bureaucracy in the collapse of the country. The well-known economist Yu.V. Yaremenko, a member of the CPSU Central Committee (1990–1991) and economic adviser to Mikhail Gorbachev (1991) offered, I believe, the most correct explanation of what "perestroika" arose from and what predetermined its natural outcome. This was done by him

in the last years of his life, after the collapse of the USSR, mainly not in publications, but in speeches and private conversations, including ones with the author of these lines. Fortunately, his colleague S.A. Belanovsky made and published remarkable recordings of his conversations with Yu.V. Yaremenko [Yaremenko, 1998].

According to Yu.V. Yaremenko, the reasons for self-destruction are rooted in the special piratical structure of Soviet society and in the role that the bureaucracy played in it. He attributes the formation of "social strata with different levels of privileges" to the Stalinist period, as a result of which a society was formed that "was class, and each higher estate had certain privileges." It was a "a social hierarchy", a "hierarchically constructed system of social guarantees" [Yaremenko, 1998: 111]. Such a system provided "high motivation for moving up the social ladder" [ibid.: 30]. The "technological structure of the economy" was built in a similar way. It had a "pyramidal structure", a hierarchy of "technological levels, according to which the distribution of resources is carried out" [ibid.: 102]. The technological and social pyramids were united by the underlying principle of resource allocation: "The entire social structure of our society was to some extent adjusted to the structure of resource allocation correlating with this" [ibid.: 110].

The Soviet society was considered by Yu.V. Yaremenko as a pyramid consisting of four levels, the first of them was filled with masses of the citizens, prisoners, which deprived of basic rights, the second one was a peasantry, which did not have rights for passports and freedom of movement, the third one was workers and other ordinary citizens, the fourth one consisted of the nomenclature. The pyramid increasingly acquired the shape of a "barrel" under urbanization, the reduction of the share of the rural population and the share of the lower stratum. Such a social structure, Yu.V. Yaremenko, encouraged everyone, except the nomenclature, to strive to a higher level. Only the nomenclature had nowhere to grow inside the system, and this focused on "abroad", this arranged own children in the appropriate universities and for subsequent occupations in embassies, trade missions, information agencies, etc.

It was the nomenclature that turned out to be the actor of "perestroika", and its corrupt part was the main beneficiary of the collapse of the social system and the state. The nomenclature elite, first of all its corrupt part, destroyed the entire pyramid in the process of reconstruction. It destroyed, and did not reform, did not modernize or in some other way transformed into a new state. Society as a whole was poorly prepared for another development option, as we could say for a reform, which was "experimentally established" during the reform of the early 1990s.

This story is instructive and extremely important for modern Russia, since the country as a whole has reproduced both the nomenclature and the administrative and command management system, although not identical to the former Soviet prototypes of the period of "developed socialism", but belonging to the same historical type. According to O.I. Kolerev's characterization, there was only a transition from "bureaucratic-socialism" to "bureaucratic-feudal capitalism" [Kolerev, 2016: 94–117]. And again, as in the years of perestroika, the assessments of the role of the nomenclature in the modern life of Russia and in solving its future historical fate differ sharply, this reflected in the discussion between Yu.A. Nisnevich [2018] and A.V. Novokreschenov [2020] is indicative in this regard.

Denationalization and corrosion of state. Even during the years of "perestroika", its main ideologist A.N. Yakovlev wrote about the need to denationalize property in order to eliminate the economic basis of the monopoly power of the bureaucracy. The "stagnation mechanism", according to him, was based on the economic basis of state ownership: "In the sphere of the basis, such a reason was the practical absolutization of state property. Equating it with the highest form of property as public property, which in fact turned into the primacy of administration, the expansion of bureaucracy... Hence the desire to give to a state everything and everything, linking any successes, achievements with administrative methods of management" [Yakovlev, 1987: 12–13].

After the collapse of the USSR the formation of a new ruling class was carried out mainly through denationalization. As already noted [Semenov, 2021], the interests of the new government were associated with forced denationalization and the early formation of a "class of

owners". The speed of transformation in the 1990s was put above quality and efficiency. Those who had to interact with ministries and the government by this period know well that it was openly said in those circles: it does not matter into which hands the property will now pass, the initial composition of the owner class cannot be of high quality and effective, but then the "foam will come off" and the market will arrange everything.

It is characteristic of the period that even after a quarter of a century the beneficiaries consider the main result of the reform of E.T. Gaidar to be precisely and only the appearance of private property in the country, ignoring the issues of the methods of its formation, the quality of the emerging class of owners and the price paid by the country for a "transformation". By the 25th anniversary of Gaidar's reforms, O.V. Vyugin said that "if we call the essence of the reforms of the 1990s in one word, then this is private property... Everything else is what should have followed private property" [Russian Economy..., 2016: 6]. In his opinion, the main thing is that "after all, there was a legal registration of ownership rights to the Soviet heritage... The heritage was very rich, and there was a legal registration of private ownership of the means of production" [Russian Economy..., 2016: 7]. Arguing with this point of view, academician V.M. Polterovich noted that, according to the calculations of A. Markevich and M. Harrison [2013], "the relative GDP losses in the 1990s in Russia were higher than the total losses during the years of terror and the years of World War II. When evaluating the reforms, should we abstract from these losses or should we also take them into account?" [Russian Economy..., 2016].

The method of forming the class of owners has significantly affected its quality and the quality of the institution of private property itself. K. Rogov notes on this occasion that "most post-Soviet countries managed to create a market economy based on free pricing, relative freedom of enterprise and freedom of profit management, but failed to reproduce or confirm the institution of property in the form that it acquired in the West" [Rogov, 2021: 42].

The new ruling class. Denationalization was not the only, but the most important mechanism for the formation of a new ruling class. Back in 1993, we already proposed a vision of what is happening with the country: "The true historical meaning of what is happening in Russia and with Russia is the change of the class elite, the formation of a new ruling class, which submits the Russian society and is set own new position in it. This, coupled with the global geopolitical confrontation between states and their groups on an increasingly overcrowded planet, explains what has already happened with the USSR and is now happening with the economy and statehood of Russia. The internal process of breaking society by the emerging and settling in new ruling class has closed with the most powerful external pressure on the country. The Cold War ended with the cold-blooded finishing off of the defeated one who had capitulated and was torn apart by internal contradictions" [Semenov, 1993: 26].

The catastrophe of the country in 1991 opened the way for a large-scale property stratification of society. Almost simultaneously, in 1992, the income gap between the 10% of the most affluent and the 10% of the least affluent increased from 3.5 times to 16 times, which exceeded the level of inequality in Western Europe and the United States at that time. The former middle class, which included engineering, technical and scientific workers, professors, teachers and officers, skilled workers, and other groups, has ceased to exist. The new middle class, which was constantly discussed in the early 1990s, was not formed for a long time. In reality, there was a process of rapid polarization of society in terms of income. And this process was the result of a conscious policy of a group of radicals which took power in the country and expressed the interests of the beneficiaries of the property distribution.

There are absolutely frank statements by E.T. Gaidar and other representatives of the state leadership of that time about the deliberate forcing of large – scale stratification. Thus, E.T. Gaidar wrote: "A chance to save [Russia. – Ed. E. S.] there was only one to chip in for the start-up capital for the reform of the whole world, " which was, in his opinion, it is necessary for the accelerated creation of a "social base of reforms"². The rapidly implemented

² Gaidar E. In the year of the Rooster the dawn must come // Komsomolskaya Pravda. 1993. №

powerful stratification of society was the planned result of state policy, and not its by-product. The robbing population of the country, it turns out, was in sake of a startup capital for reform, including the milliard fortunes of a small number of clans associated with the family of B.N. Yeltsin.

To characterize the method of forming a new ruling class, it is important to take into account not only that it was created mainly due to a forced redistribution of property, but also that this redistribution occurred on the basis of a significant drop in production. A gigantic redistributive process has suppressed production and scientific and technological development, law and the state, culture and morality. The country was sacrificed to the new class "elite".

In the interspecific struggle of the "elites", the new elite won battle with the former going back nomenclature. But is this a good thing for the country? The former nomenclature was an inefficiently managed, but also relatively cheap class. This is in a common sense car-tin for poor societies. The new class costs for the Russian society more, although its business and civil qualities are more than questionable. If we citizens were then less exalted and more discriminating in our attitude to the overdue, but difficult changes our choice would be more responsible, and its consequences would not be so deplorable.

For the second time in the Twentieth century after the revolution at the beginning of the century and the reforms at its end a ruling class was born in the country, the method of economic approval of which was not creation, but the forced redistribution property in its favor. Once again, the first direct results of this actions were the degradation of the economy and the collapse of the Russian statehood.

Geopolitical significance. There were until 1991 two self – sufficient systems in the world: the capitalist countries and the socialist block. For more than half a century, it seemed that the socialist system was overcoming the capitalist one. But in the last quarter of the century, everything completely turned upside down: communist China fell away from the socialist system and went to the capitalist system, then the entire socialist camp in Central and Eastern Europe collapsed, and finally the Soviet Union collapsed.

What is the historical meaning of this process? We believe that the world capitalist system, which won the historical competition, began to disassemble the system, which lost a struggle, to get "spare parts" and dispose these ones. Such a fragment of the USSR as Russia is not integrated in the dominant world capitalist system. Therefore, there is for the Western world a question of continuing the fragmentation of the remnants of the defeated system, i.e. Russia. But in this case, the West faced a stronger integrity in contrary to the USSR or, especially, the socialist block. And now either the collapse of Russia will continue in 1991, or the global process, due to the stability of Russia, will somehow change its direction.

Speaking about the 30th anniversary that passed after the collapse of the Communist system, the Bulgarian researcher I. Krastev calls it the era of imitation. According to him, "it was 1989 that marked the beginning" of this era. But "after the initial fascination with the idea of copying the Western model in different parts of the world, devoid of political and ideological alternatives, there is an increasingly obvious aversion to the policy of imitation. It is this lack of alternatives and not the gravitational pull of the authoritarian past or the historically ingrained hostility to liberalism, that best explains the Anti-Western sentiments, which have dominant sense today in post-communist societies" [Krastev, 2021: 48]. Pseudo-capitalism of the period of the developed capitalist world is the possible future of Russia if the country's ruling class continues to struggle for a place in its hallway and if the Russian society will not find the strength to free itself from comprador clans.

The study of the collapse of the USSR in 1991 is of fundamental practical importance for modern Russia, because the nomenclature and administrative command management have been reformed in the country, and because the victorious world capitalist system has begun to directly absorb Russia as the last major fragment of the defeated system. The direction of further global development depends fundamentally on Russia's ability to stand up in this geopolitical struggle.

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