



THE CENTRE  
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## **Public Lecture 11**

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*Soviet New Thinking*

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Public Lecture 11 (November 1999)  
Alexei Pankin, 'Soviet New Thinking'

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## Preliminary remarks

When I received an invitation to speak on the topic of New Thinking I was a bit concerned since it is not that often when you return to those exciting times which started as a breath of fresh air and later turned into a rather depressing affair. Many of the things that transpired during Perestroika are still unclear to me and I often go back to them and wonder as many other people do. So, I was trying ever since July, when I received this invitation, to put together a coherent picture of what had happened but all I ended up with is a not very coherent mosaic which I will try to present to you today. I will start with a couple of introductory remarks and caveats.

## It could have been worse (or what is a pleasant conservative reactionary?)

Russia is a nation with a long history including 1,000 years of Christianity. Serfdom, however, was only abolished in 1861. Until then the majority of Russians were not even free, they belonged to nobility and could be traded like goods. Before the Communist Revolution, Russia had only had twelve years of more or less constitutional development i.e. parliament, free press etc. Four of these twelve years were during World War I when all democratic institutions were, if not abolished then, curtailed. Following that we had the terrible 70 years of Communism when, by different estimates, from 40 to 60 million people died. With this in mind, looking back at the past 15 years since 1985 it seems incredible how smoothly things are going. Freedom of speech, private economic initiative, freedom of travel rights which had been a distant goal only in 1985 are now taken for granted. Russia today seems to be well advanced on its long way to a mature democracy and civil society. By that I do not claim that it is pleasant to be a participant in all these things and that life is smooth and nice. Prevailing mood in the nation now is pretty pessimistic and I will mostly try to explain why.

I need to explain why I call myself a conservative reactionary and I will do that aided by an old Soviet joke. A young aspiring party functionary was once asked: "You always agree with your bosses, but do you have an opinion of your own?" to which the young man replied: "Of course I do, but I disagree with it strongly." This is, in a way, very similar to my state of mind. I often hate the things I say and the thoughts that come to my mind. I also feel that the term distances me equally from the hard line Communists and hard line Yeltsin style 'democrats'.

## There is nothing New under the Sun

As for the New Thinking, I say that there is nothing new under the sun. To a large extent Perestroika and New Thinking had neither obvious reasons nor tangible results. The entire process was initiated out of boredom and a desire to be liked by the West, where most of the ideas behind New Thinking originated. That said, some of my experiences during these past 15 years were pretty unique for many reasons which prompts me to provide some biographical background which I hope will enable a better understanding of how I arrived at this conclusion

## Biography (or how Soviet elites did not mix)

I was born into the Soviet establishment. My father was editor of a popular national newspaper. He later became the founder of the Soviet Copyright Agency (VAAP) and that means basically that he was very much part of the Soviet political and of cultural elite.

I was married to the daughter of the Deputy Minister for Shipbuilding, one of the most powerful men in the defence industry and, that in itself was quite unusual since cultural elites and industrial elites in the Soviet Union usually did not mix. They did not even communicate. They despised each other from the distance. Just by virtue of this marriage I was exposed to the top tier of the military industrial complex. The Institute of USA and Canada, which I joined in 1979, was one of the most important and powerful think tanks in Russian foreign policy. I was part of a small group who were close to the Director, Georgy Arbatov, who was an influential advisor to Brezhnev, Andropov, not to Chernenko but to Gorbachev for some years. By virtue of this access I was exposed to the workings of foreign policy establishment and foreign policy making in the Soviet Union at an early age. When Perestroika started the institute where I worked was one of the first to join in. We were writing Memos to the Central Committee, which advocated many of the ideas of 'New Thinking'. We knew that some of our proposals ended up on Gorbachev's desk and sometimes we could identify phrases and ideas advanced in our papers in his speeches.

In 1988 I became deputy editor of 'International Affairs' which was the leading foreign policy journal in Russia. It was close to Shevardnadze and, by extension, I became close to some of his advisors. I was particularly appreciated, not so much for my New Thinking ideas but for my, so called, writing talents. I was probably the only person outside of Shevardnadze's Georgian speechwriter who could imitate his flowery, oriental style where you express a simple idea in very many words. A large part of my contribution to the new thinking as expressed by Shevardnadze and his associates came from these skills.

As Perestroika progressed I got involved in, what was then called, 'Informal Activities'. I was present at the birth of a number of discussion clubs, which presented the first manifestations of civil society in the Soviet Union. I also was one of the founding fathers of the '20th Century and Peace' magazine, which was probably the only really free thinking outlet in the USSR which did not only denounce Communism but also tried to discuss and explain where we stood and where we were moving. In this respect, I became a fellow traveller in semi dissident circles.

I was fortunate to be present at the birth of many of the texts, which were later deemed historical by either contributing to them or just seeing them prior to publication. I was, thus, able not only to judge the actual texts but also the motives and personalities behind them.

I was also fortunate to discover early in my life that Moscow is not Russia. I travelled and did quite a lot throughout Russia.

## Propaganda and Counter Propaganda (or how ridiculous motives lead to sensible results)

Paradoxically, much of the New Thinking was coming as a response to a insane idea of the Communist party hierarchy, the ideological department. At the beginning of the Gorbachev era, the Soviet propaganda establishment was obsessed with counter propaganda. It was assumed that the West was waging a propaganda war against the Soviet Union, which had to be confronted with counter propaganda. For example, among the ideas we proposed, in response to Western accusations of authoritarianism, were the release of Sakharov from his Gorky exile and the establishment of a multi party system in Russia. This is quite characteristic for the Soviet establishment where a ridiculous motive can lead to a very sensible result.

## The society which did not understand itself (or how sensible motives lead to ridiculous results)

In order to have 'New Thinking' or, for that matter, any thinking at all, it is important to know the subject you are thinking about. Inadequate knowledge of the society was, however, a fundamental shortcoming, not only of 'New Thinking' but also of all reforms in the Soviet Union. We lived in a society, which did not know, did not explore and did not understand itself. Among the first to openly admit that was Andropov. Shortly after he was promoted or moved from heading the KGB to the No. 2 position in the party hierarchy, the Secretary of the Communist Party for Ideology, he wrote an interesting piece in 'Communist' journal, the theoretical organ of the Central Committee. In that article he openly confessed that we do not know the society we are living in. That was several years prior to Perestroika and it was that much more sensational coming from someone who had controlled the very institution tasked with analysing the state of the society. He commanded an army of many many thousands of so called 'plaincloth sociologists', secret informers which penetrated every facet of society.

There are a number of reasons why, even, Andropov did not understand the society we were living in. One of them is the dogmatic interpretation of Communism in Russia, which meant that all findings (even strictly confidential ones) had to conform to the scripture.

At another level, the scripture as crafted by Marx, Engels and Lenin in their lifetimes was quite large and often contradictory so that you could find confirmation in it for the wildest ideas. This led many would be dissidents to read and sometimes draw inspiration from Lenin, especially from texts that were not recommended for reading by the party including some where you could find scathing criticism of the Soviet system, of Communist bureaucracy etc.

Another reason for the lack of understanding of Soviet society was the lack of tools. Sociology deemed a bourgeois pseudo science was forbidden for many years. There were some excellent Soviet sociologists and people interested in their findings but there were very few of them and their research rarely filtered outside a very narrow circle. A similar situation could be observed in journalism where some high quality

investigative reporting and analysis was focused on isolated events and issues stopping short of providing a full picture of the situation in the country.

One of the main impediments to a proper analysis and understanding of the Soviet society was the overriding culture of secrecy. This was probably the worse impediment since even people who were supposed to know how things worked didn't. They were confined to their own isolated silos. For instance, both my father and my father in law were exposed to a wide range of information but they hardly knew anything about each other's areas. My father as editor of a national daily, had no idea and no way to find out how my father in law's ministry worked. In the Soviet Union there was no single reservoir of knowledge and no one had access to the workings of the Soviet economy, ideology or social life as a whole.

The only exception, in this respect, was literature, which in those times assumed the role of social and political science. There was an astonishing pluralism in the later years of the pre Gorbachev era where you could find the whole spectrum from the ultra nationalists to the liberal in the officially permitted literature and literary journals. I call it 'totalitarian pluralism'. But literature is at best a research instrument. It only provides a glimpse of how people would potentially react to this or that situation. For instance, if you read the short stories by Vassily Shukshin you will have an idea of Russian people, of what their interests are, how they live, etc. but this can hardly be an instrument for developing and promoting a coherent reform programme.

Finally, many of those who were New Thinkers, like myself and for that matter most Russians, were dreamy idealists who operated more on ideals, on what they want to see rather than on what actually existed.

For these reasons it is pretty difficult to call New Thinking a thinking at all since thinking was separated from its object. This is best illustrated by the following example. Some of you would probably recall Gorbachev's historical initiative, the unilateral reductions of the Soviet Army by 500,000. The initiative, announced in a speech at the UN in 1987, was an important step and a breakthrough but as you examine the way it was carried out in practical terms it had largely negative consequences.

Of the 500,000 troops who were supposed to be demobilised (the figures are illustrative, not actual) 300,000 or 400,000 were conscripts who simply would not be drafted. The remaining 100,000 were officers who had nothing but their military profession and lived mostly in military housing. Demobilising these officers would mean relocating 400,000 people (including families) for which there were no jobs or housing.

Implementation of the 'General Reduction of the Armed Forces' as the initiative was called was carried out by the military establishment comprised mainly of conservative unsophisticated people who, thus, acquired a new weapon which they could wield against just about anyone who stood in their way. This was not limited to the elimination of anyone who was inconvenient to his superiors. It also led to stifling debate on military reform inside the Army since any such arguments could be punished by sacking or the threat thereof under the title of the General Reduction of the Armed Forces.

The implementation of cuts was carried out in a disorganised haphazard way since no one knew exactly the size of the Russian army. Not even the highest ranking officers knew how many tanks there were in the Soviet Army as a whole. Some of the proposed cuts, such as the elimination of satellite tracking stations were detrimental to the stability and safety of the entire defence system. Other cuts were economically unfeasible. Most cuts led to excessive losses and fostered alienation among the rank and file officers who may have otherwise formed an important support group of a transition to a market economy.

Unfortunately, this was characteristic for many of the reform initiatives undertaken under the title of Perestroika and New Thinking. Good intentions led to disastrous consequences because people simply did not understand how the country works. Reform initiatives, however nicely they may have sounded to foreigners, were completely irrelevant and even destabilising when applied to the realities on the ground

## The Mystery Man who Knew

In my endless explorations of the various strata of Soviet society I chanced upon one person who had a clear and very coherent picture of how the Soviet society worked. At the time I met him, he had recently retired from the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Soviet Army General Staff where he worked at one of the analytical departments. By virtue of his work, he was exposed to the best available information on both Western and Soviet economic and military planning and he had an understanding of what the market economy works. The problem was that he was bound by so many security pledges that there is absolutely no way he could share his knowledge and understanding with anyone around.

## 'New Thinking' as a Foreign Concept (or how Soviet leaders sought affirmation in the West)

One of the main shortcomings of 'New Thinking' was that it was both borrowed from and oriented toward the West. As such, it was a result of an important cultural and demographic trend, which intensified shortly before Perestroika. By that time the so called 'unwhipped generation' was coming of age. It consisted of people who never lived under Stalin. Some of them were born under Khrushchev but had forgotten his chaotic and unpredictable reforming which kept the establishment in insecurity for their status albeit not for their lives, as under Stalin. They lived under stable conditions with expanding exposure to everything Western. They had no real fears nor did they adhere to the dogmas of their fathers and grandfathers. They often had a Western orientation.

In general a great part of the motivation for those who stood behind the 'New Thinking' was to raise the way they were appraised by Westerners to the level of their self appraisal. Just to give an illustration, today Mary Kaldor and I recalled a Soviet official we knew together. He spoke at the END convention in 1984 (well before Perestroika) where he was attacked as a party propagandist. I worked for him for a while and he was, in fact, part of the 'forces of good'. While not being able to speak his mind openly, he was contributing a lot of ideas from behind the scene to

counteract the escalation of the Cold War from the Soviet side during the Reagan years. He thought of himself as a closet liberal or a reformer, and in fact was one which was quite typical in Soviet times. He was therefore that much more offended for being called a party propagandist by Westerners.

Many New Thinking ideas relating to nuclear disarmament and security were coming from the West. A large part of the new thinking is simply borrowed from books and articles by EP Thompson, Mary Kaldor, George Kennan, etc.

Many Perestroika politicians were more interested in looking good to Westerners and in speaking to them than in explaining things to their own compatriots. This was to large extent part of the motivation behind Gorbachev's focus on foreign policy. Even reform orientated people in the Communist Party establishment had no idea what to do with, say, with the economy. Feeling the need to deliver something they often focused on areas where they could achieve quick results. Foreign policy was the main among those areas and by focusing on it they all, including Gorbachev, eventually became dependent on the West for their political survival.

The desire to be liked by foreigners was one of the main motivations and tragedies of Perestroika and New Thinking. Indeed, when Gorbachev and other Perestroika leaders were travelling to the West and talking to Western audiences they seemed much more content than when they had to address their own compatriots.

## Did Russia really need Perestroika (or reforms out of boredom)

Perestroika and Glasnost were in many respects paradoxical events which would have happened sooner or later and one way or another, but which really did not necessarily need to take place since there was little self interest in changing anything in the Soviet Union when Gorbachev came to power.

The main driving force for change in that time was boredom. People where bored of having to watch Brezhnev, a person who could hardly speak, on television everyday for 16 years. Then they were subjected to a series of old and ailing General Secretaries being promoted as geniuses only to die in rapid succession. There was a general sense of boredom and kind of a longing for change at an abstract level.

Otherwise there was little self interest or pressure from below behind the reforms. Compared to the famines of 1928 and the early 1930's and the sufferings of World War II which had befallen the people under Communism, the last ten or 15 years before Perestroika were characterised by relative calm, predictability and gradual improvement in living standards.

## Reagan and Perestroika (or Star Wars, a manna from heaven)

Reagan with his new Cold War and the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) is often given undue credit for compelling Russia to think and to acknowledge the need to be competitive. Nothing could be further from the truth, as old Communist propagandists would say.

The Brezhnev era was characterised by a relaxation in the internal political situation and a slow but incremental liberalisation. I experienced this trend as a journalist and political writer from the mid 1970's. I noticed that I could actually publish more and more controversial and even heretical ideas every year. Whatever the source of the new Cold War, whether it was the Soviets or the Americans it came as a present from Reagan to the Soviet propaganda machine and the Communist reactionary establishment which used it as an excuse to clamp down on these freedoms.

SDI was also a god send for the Soviet Military establishment and it almost literally fell from the sky. There were two dominating lobbies in the military establishment, the tank lobby and a nuclear missiles lobby. The first Soviet reaction to SDI was the idea of 'asymmetric response'. That meant that the Soviet Union had to build more missiles, which provided a perfect excuse for demanding additional funding for missile factories, design bureaus and to all those who were in charge of that particular sector of the Russian establishment. The tank lobby by definition benefits from anything. Whatever new happens, Soviet generals would say, "we need more tanks." In fact more tanks and more missiles meant only one thing: more majors would become colonels and more colonels would be promoted to generals. In this context people in the Soviet military establishment were really happy with Reagan and SDI for increasing their influence and their privileges within the Soviet society.

## Economic reforms and the grabbing mentality

Despite the growing awareness among Soviet leaders of the fact that the country was lagging behind the West, there was no stimulus for reforms. Soviet media during the Perestroika years was rife with graphic descriptions of the fact that the Soviet Union was trailing behind in terms of productivity, competitiveness etc. Many decision makers were truly concerned with this on a general conceptual level. However, the centrally planned economy was characterised by the struggle between various lobbies for scarce resources. Hence, when it came to drafting budgets, setting priorities, etc., everybody abandoned the quest of promoting the country's economy and reforms and reverted to their instinctive desire to grab a larger chunk of resources for themselves.

## Communism was not defeated. It committed suicide (or how Stalin saved Perestroika)

By 1988 many people in the conservative establishment which was still strong, began to understand that things were really getting out of hand. At that time the democratic movement was insignificant and the press although freer than before was still under control. Why did the establishment refrain from stopping these developments, something that they could have easily done given the fact that they still controlled the country apart from a dozen media outlet? This is another Perestroika paradox, which is best illustrated by the following story.

In the summer of 1990, 'Pravda' newspaper carried a letter signed by a number of chief designers, the people who ran the military industrial complex, which contained a stern demand to Gorbachev and to the Congress of Peoples Deputies to reconsider the economic policies of Perestroika. The letter was widely attacked by the media as an assault by conservative anti democracy, anti market forces and a sign that Gorbachev

was surrendering to those forces. I found that amusing since I happened to have copy edited this ultimatum, as it was then described. The original letter signed by nine ministers of the military industrial complex was submitted to Gorbachev by hand. One of the letter's authors who liked me for some reason and sometimes consulted with me showed me the original draft and asked me to edit the style, which I did. Of course I did not agree with him their ideas were just about as irrelevant as those reformist ones they countered. But it was amusing to be in the middle of a situation like that. By that time a gambling mentality let's throw a stone in a glass house and see what happens was very typical of reform process activists like myself. I then told him, "You must understand that this is really an ultimatum and now after this you either have to push it through to the end or Gorbachev will sack you all. He will understand what it means. That is politics. You need to be aware of that." I spoke with him several days later and I asked, "How did it go?" He said, "It was given to Gorbachev." I asked, "How?" He said, "One of our ministers hung around for a couple of days in Gorbachev's reception. Gorbachev had no time to receive him. He finally caught him almost literally on the way to the toilet and gave him the letter. Gorbachev looked at it and said, "This is very interesting but I have no time to discuss these things now. I will call you and we will arrange for a special meeting"". I said, "I don't think this was the proper way to deal with the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the President of the Soviet Union. Once you, the people who really control the Soviet economy, have agreed on something, why don't you go to the General Staff Headquarters, call Gorbachev from the Office of the Chief of General Staff and say "Comrade President, nine ministers of the defence industry and the Chief of General Staff are assembled together in the latter's office. We would like to meet you in twenty minutes." You will see he will be there in ten minutes." You should have seen the minister's reaction to my words. His face turned white as he started to mutter some excuses and said, "No, no, no, this had never occurred to me. We industrialists are loyal to our President. We were only trying to draw his attention to some problems in the Soviet economy. We will follow whatever decisions he takes." He clearly took me for a provocateur and that was the end of our confidential relation. I realised at that point that Perestroika, in some sense, was saved by the legacy of Stalinism. Stalin used to eliminate periodically layer after layer of industrial managers and military commanders. This went on for many years and was imprinted in the consciousness of their successors. They knew that they should avoid any involvement in politics under all circumstances. They did not even think politically, and even those who survived Stalin or came of age much later continued to harbour the collective fear of past purges and reverence for the General Secretary.

## The role of the West (or the Kiss of Death)

In many respects Western handling of Gorbachev was similar to the latter's handling of the situation in the Soviet Union. The West did not understand the workings of the Soviet system. One reason was the tendency to apply logic and causality to a system that defied both. Western analysts believe that if something happened, it happened for a reason which is true. However, the real reasons have often been different from the ones perceived by Western observers. Westerners believed that if something happened it was for a purpose. However, the logic behind the Soviet leaders' actions was often absurd. For example, the most convincing explanation, I heard, for the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was that they wanted to create a big noise to cover the banishment of Sakharov to Gorky. I find this explanation as credible as the

proposition that this was a new round of Soviet expansion and a drive to reach the warm seas. Another example is the deployment of midrange missiles, SS 20, in Eastern and Central Europe. The West predictably perceived this as a sign of growing Soviet aggressiveness. I believe that a probable reason for the deployment was that the head of the design bureau, which made these missiles, had access to Brezhnev. He probably managed to convince Brezhnev to give him money to build as many of those missiles as possible over a bottle of vodka.

The West was not reacting to the actual internal dynamics of the Soviet system but to its own, often erroneous, interpretation of these dynamics. This led to major mistakes. One of them was that too much emphasis was placed on supporting Gorbachev. He seemed to be the only person the West was willing to talk to. At some point this made Gorbachev the most hated person in the Soviet Union. By supporting him and sticking to him so unquestionably, the West was actually weakening Gorbachev's position and destabilising the situation in the Soviet Union.

The singular focus on Gorbachev by the West also undermined his role as the main arbiter among the constituent republics of the Soviet Union. The West was for a long time oblivious to such important developments as the drive for sovereignty in these republics. Both moderate and nationalist leaders in the republics having failed to draw Western attention or support began to shout louder and louder. They became radicalised and often went beyond what they were originally prepared to do just because the Western ignored them. These actions further undermined Gorbachev's position.

## Questions

**Q:** You said that there was no internal pressure for Perestroika and Glasnost and I fully understand that there's no reason at all, why the old Soviet establishment should engage in a policy of Glasnost. There was, however, some form of an economic crisis in the Soviet Union at that time and many opinion formers of Gorbachev's generation were aware of the need to do something about it. Considering, for example, the group of Siberian economists statement of 1983 to the Central Committee which is an example of this awareness would you still insist that there was no internal pressure for Perestroika?

**A:** There was indeed an awareness of the need for change. Facts, figures and research substantiated it but there was absolutely no internal motivation for change. As soon as these important decision makers came to dividing the budget pie they behaved completely differently. The idea of national interest or common goal or even affinity to the country was, and remains today, albeit for different reasons, almost non-existent. People were more concerned with staying in power than anything else. There was no mechanism for translating the awareness of crisis and the need for change into reforms.

On another level, let me here come back to my earlier thesis on the separation of thinking and the object to which it was applied. I mentioned several times that decision makers did not know what to do with the economy. This is not entirely correct. They thought they knew and this was good because changes did start after

all , yet in fact they did not know what they were doing and this explains why we had 15 years of economic change, but no proper reforms so far. If you reread the report you mentioned, you will see how naive it looks now. The authors are operating in normal economic terms GDP, productivity, reduction of defence expenditures etc which had no bearing on the Soviet style economy. How do you calculate a GDP if Ruble, national currency, weighed differently in different sectors of the economy, if there were dozens of hard currency exchange rates depending on the country you are trading with or on a commodity? What is productivity if pricing was completely arbitrary? What is a defence expenditure in a hundred per cent militarised economy? In other words, you could only have instincts about Soviet economy, no objective knowledge.

**Q:** You said that you did not understand the Soviet society at the beginning of the 1980's. Do you think that now Russian scientists and political analysts understand what is happening in Russia? Can you today analyse political decisions and the motivation behind them? We recently witnessed a number of decisions, which were surprising not only for the West. For example, the occupation of the airport in Pristina by Russian forces at the end of the Kosovo war came as a surprise even to the Russian Foreign Minister.

What are Russian perceptions of the impact of the new thinking on Russia's position in the world? There is a very widely held opinion in Russia that new thinking was simply used by the West in order to dismantle the Soviet Empire. In this context, how do you evaluate the results of the New Thinking policy in the sphere of foreign policy? Which direction will Russian foreign policy take after Yeltsin?

**A:** We understand our society better than before. However, there are different levels of analysis. One thing is to understand how the society functions and organises in general. We are much better equipped for this now for many reasons. Another thing is to analyse individual decision. In this sense no customary means of analysis can be applied to the decisions of our current policy makers.

For me the main positive result of the New Thinking was that it led to a dismantling of the Communist system and this had happened relatively peacefully. It could have been worse. Such change can hardly ever occur smoothly. When the society in question is built on 60 million killed people you would expect at least half as much to perish in its undoing. The greatest loss of life since the collapse of the Soviet Union was the 100,000 people killed in Chechnya during the 1994-1996 war, and that was post Gorbachev. If you take an outside view, as a sociologist or someone who does not live in the country, you can say that it could have been much worse. Even though I speak about the suicide of Communism, I am aware of the risks that existed if the reactionary establishment managed to coalesce around a decisive leader. These people had no scruples. They could have resorted to killing to stop Perestroika. There were many real possibilities for carnage. You can all see what had happened when we finally got a decisive leader, Boris Yeltsin: shelling the building of the legitimately elected Parliament in October 1993 in order to eliminate opposition to 'democratic' reforms and the destruction of Chechnya. Nevertheless I believe that an elected President is less dangerous to his people than unelected General Secretary. This is what I mean when I say that it could have been worse.

Russia suffers, in some ways even more than the Soviet Union, from the fact that very few of its people identify themselves with it. The idea of a national interest in this context is far fetched. I think personal considerations rather than national interest or a certain policy motivated the action in Kosovo.

At a high level of abstraction, however, one important change did occur in Russian foreign policy. The pre Primakov and pre crisis foreign policy was basically promoting export orientated industries. Now policy is more oriented at domestic producers. This change was primarily precipitated by the crisis of August 17, 1998. This is similar to the American Civil War where South and North had different perceptions of foreign policy depending on whether they lived on cheap slave labour, exported cotton and imported high quality products from Britain and France, or were industrialising and interested in selling their own lower quality products on domestic markets

**Q:** Among the various sources of the new thinking, you mentioned most interestingly the fact that some dissidents were finding inspiration in Lenin. You also mentioned books by Mary Kaldor, George Kennan and others. I wonder to what extent you ascribe importance to the underground circulation of manuscripts and other unpublished materials or 'Samizdat' as a source of New Thinking?

**A:** I hardly know anyone among educated Russians who did not have access to some of the underground literature. It had an educational value and reinforced awareness of the need for change. Liberal establishment reformers of the Communist era were also exposed to this literature and it provided them with inspiration to work from within the system. Samizdat played an important role in promoting this vague and idealistic drive for change

**Q:** The thaw in the Cold War from 1986 to about 1989 is often characterised as a means for domestic reforms. Gorbachev needed a benign international environment as a context in which reforms could occur. This characterisation seems to sit a little uneasily with your somewhat haphazard description of New Thinking and its development. Is this characterisation accurate?

**A:** Many of the reforms were inspired and supported by Western policies, ideas, funding and promotion of certain people. The question is whether these reforms were what the Soviet Union really addressed the real problems and whether this was the best contribution that the West could provide. Was the West supporting the type of reforms, which would be most peaceful and smooth? The 'Mystery Man' mentioned above, for example, advocated an approach which would have led to economic reforms and democratisation through a completely different approach. According to him, it was necessary to explain to the Russian people that the West is dangerous and aggressive and was preparing for war while the Soviet Union was being betrayed by its own Generals; that the way the Soviet army was built with its thousands of missiles, tanks and meaningless military expenditure was devastating the economy; that Russia is defenceless in front of a dangerous enemy; and that the only way to respond to this threat is through unilateral disarmament. He sought to promote radical market reforms to the Russian people as the only way to achieve security since they provide the economic foundation for normal, healthy and reliable defence. He also advocated a non aggressive foreign policy as a way to avoid provoking Russia's

rivals. These arguments would have certainly boded well with the Russian people. Russians with their siege mentality and memories of World War II are more susceptible to arguments aimed at defending Russia from a hostile world, than to the arguments promoted by Gorbachev at that time. Together with other people I tried to pass on such ideas to Shevardnadze and Gorbachev but they did not take them on board. By that time they were completely dependent on support from the West. It was unacceptable for them to suddenly transform from reformers who pleased the West into reformers who use a language acceptable to the Russian people.

**Q:** I wonder if you could say something about the impact of Sakharov on New Thinking and whether he was feared because of his influence at home, or because of his influence abroad.

**A:** Sakharov was a symbol and his impact was primarily moral. While he was alive, there were certain things that people were ashamed of doing. Otherwise I can not recall any intellectual contributions that he made to New Thinking. In this respect, establishment reformers contributed more to dismantling the system than dissidents. They all had a profound sense of shame when confronted with people who had the same goals and had the courage to speak out openly and go to jail while they worked behind the scene toward these goals and were rewarded by the system. Many establishment reformers had an inferiority complex for not being in jail and that was an important motive behind many of their actions.

**Q:** How do you assess the personal role of Gorbachev in initiating Glastnost and Perestroika? Was he the sole initiator or did he work with other people? How well did he know where he was going and how much of it was improvised? What social forces in the Soviet Union did he represent?

**A:** Gorbachev was not the sole initiator and he worked with other people. Yet Gorbachev won Perestroika almost singlehandedly. As a person, as an individual, I think, all he was concerned with was his own political survival and the promotion of his political career. Yet, somehow the ways he chose to political survival namely by balancing between the relevant political forces whatever those forces were at any given moment coincided with the peaceful dismantling of the system.

**Q:** You put a lot of emphasis on the influence of the West on new thinking and Perestroika but I wanted to ask you about two other possible influences. One is the war in Afghanistan, how did that affect Soviet society, how did it affect returning soldiers, their attitude to conscription and being sent to places like Eastern Europe and Afghanistan? The second is Central Europe, Solidarity, the changes in Poland, surely that must have had quite a shaking up influence on thinking in establishment circles. I remember visiting, the Institute for the Study of the Socialist World Economy and there was as much discussion going on there as in your institute. How do you think the East Europeans influenced New Thinking?

**A:** Nobody really understood why the war in Afghanistan took place. There was some sort of an official reason. There were many Western interpretations too, which were, of course, quite different, but nobody knew why it really happened. It was a significant drain on Soviet resources and it was very unpopular. The withdrawal from Afghanistan was one of the few things that Gorbachev is well remembered for.

I do not know what those who had to fight in Afghanistan thought. For the Russian army, as far as conscripts are concerned, it is the conditions within the army that matters most. Bullying was and remains one of the main problems in the Russian army.

Poland was important too. Not in terms of ideas, but it added to the general perception that things are going wrong. Russians always respected Poles more than Czechs and this is why they got away so easily. The Russians invaded Czechoslovakia because they knew the Czechs would not fight. There was always a perception in Russia that the Poles would fight.

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Alexei Pankin joined the Institute of USA and Canada, one of the most powerful think tanks in the Soviet Union in 1979. He was close to the Director, Georgy Arbatov, an advisor to Brezhnev, Andropov, and Gorbachev. In 1988 he became the deputy editor of *International Affairs* (Moscow), one of the leading foreign policy journals in the Soviet Union. He also was one of the founders of the magazine *20th Century and Peace*, an analytical periodical reflecting the new freedom of expression permitted by glasnost'. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union he joined the European Institute for the Media. Dr Pankin currently edits *Sreda*, a magazine for media professionals published in Moscow