Directorate of Intelligence

Rising Political Instability Under Gorbachev: Understanding the Problem and Prospects for Resolution [redacted]

An Intelligence Assessment

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Rising Political Instability Under Gorbachev: Understanding the Problem and Prospects for Resolution [redacted]

Key Judgments

Information available as of 31 March 1989 was used in this report.

The Soviet Union is less stable today than at any time since Stalin's great purges in the 1930s. General Secretary Gorbachev clearly hopes that, by shaking up the Soviet system, he can rouse the population out of its lethargy and channel the forces he is releasing in a constructive direction. Even Gorbachev realizes, however, that it is far from certain that he will be able to control the process he has set in motion. That process could create so much turmoil and unrest that it will be very difficult for him to achieve his goals. In the extreme, his policies and political power could be undermined, and the political stability of the Soviet system could be fundamentally threatened. [redacted]

Gorbachev's reforms—while yet to remedy existing problems—have caused new challenges to surface. Having seen their quality of life stagnate under Gorbachev, Soviet citizens are becoming increasingly skeptical of reform, seeing it more and more as a threat to the secure existence they recall they enjoyed under Brezhnev. Moreover, the aspects of reform that are potentially most destabilizing are only in their early stages. The political reforms being introduced could further erode central authority and could give disaffected groups new platforms to challenge the regime. Radical economic reform appears further away because the kinds of market-oriented measures required to meet economic objectives would heighten social tensions by raising prices, creating unemployment, and increasing economic inequality. Moreover, such a transition could create a period of economic chaos and a sharp drop in production before the reforms began to yield positive results. [redacted]

Over the past two years, incidents of political unrest in the USSR, ranging from benign small gatherings to major acts of political violence, have sharply escalated. Under the banner of *glasnost*, Soviet citizens are organizing groups that could form the basis of a political opposition and are advancing a wide range of demands that challenge central authority. The most dangerous of these are the nationalist movements that have blossomed in many republics, unleashing centrifugal forces that, if unchecked, could threaten to tear the system apart. This increasing assertiveness by national minorities is provoking a backlash among the Russians, emboldening Russian nationalist groups and setting the stage for violent clashes in the republics where the Russians are in danger of becoming second-rate citizens. [redacted]

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The comprehensive nature of Gorbachev's reforms has polarized the Soviet elite, alienating many party members who stand to lose privileges and social stature and increasing the potential for a debilitating split in the leadership. Party conservatives fear that the cure being offered by Gorbachev is worse than the disease, arguing that the reforms may undermine party rule and produce a crisis of their own. Although the influence of Gorbachev's opponents on the Politburo has been weakened, they have a strong base of support among members of the elite who feel threatened by his reforms, including sizable elements in the Central Committee, the party and state apparatus, the military, and the KGB.

There have also been growing signs of frustration among Soviet citizens. Reforms are fueling expectations for improvements in the quality of life, but, from the standpoint of the Soviet workers, Gorbachev's economic program has been a near disaster, and there is a widespread popular perception that conditions have deteriorated. Moreover, the secure existence they came to take for granted under Brezhnev is being threatened by pressures to work harder and a fear that only the most productive workers will be rewarded. *Glasnost* and political liberalization have enhanced regime legitimacy among some elements of the population, especially the intelligentsia, by giving them hope that things can be improved by working through the system. At the same time, as the 26 March election demonstrated, such reforms have released pressures for further changes that could undermine the party's monopoly on political power.

Nevertheless, the Soviet leadership has undertaken the hazardous path of radical reform because it believes that the old system was failing and that, in the long run, it would have been more dangerous to do nothing. Particularly while Gorbachev remains at the helm, the leadership will not be easily swayed from this path. It specifically recognizes that the highly centralized Stalinist economic model was increasingly ill suited to reversing the economic slide that began under Brezhnev and narrowing the technological gap with the West. At the same time, Soviet political institutions were failing to provide social liberties and legitimate channels for airing concerns to a population that is increasingly well educated and informed. Corruption, abuses of privilege, and unfulfilled promises under Brezhnev compounded these problems by increasing popular cynicism and alienation and helping to erode the legitimacy of the regime.

The Soviet leadership possesses tremendous capabilities for controlling unrest and preventing opposition from threatening the regime. Gorbachev himself is a major asset, demonstrating masterful political skills in building support for his radical agenda, keeping the opposition off balance, and maintaining cohesion in the leadership. He is also a risk taker, however, increasing the possibility he could miscalculate in a critical situation. Should political skill alone not be sufficient to control opposition, the regime still possesses the powerful coercive forces of the KGB, military, and militia. While it has already used these to deal with particular outbreaks of unrest, any broad-scale reliance on coercion to maintain stability would seriously undermine the reform process. Short of resorting to force, the considerable degree of centralized control the Soviet state exerts over key aspects of society—jobs, prices, wages, housing, transportation, media, and imports—gives it other important levers it can use to help maintain stability.

The next several years promise to be some of the most turbulent in Soviet history. Indeed, while the kind of turmoil now being created in the USSR has been effectively managed in many countries, in other countries it has contributed to the destabilization of the political system. There are too many unknowns to determine whether Gorbachev will be able to control the process he has started, or if it will increasingly come to control him, making a wide range of outcomes possible over the next five years:

- If Gorbachev's reforms begin to produce tangible results and if he is lucky, he should remain in power and prevent any of the potential problems he faces from getting out of control, while continuing to move his reforms ahead.

- A growing perception within the leadership that reforms are threatening the stability of the regime could lead to a conservative reaction. This would probably, but not necessarily, involve a transfer of power—with a majority of the Politburo voting Gorbachev out, as happened with Khrushchev in 1964—and a repudiation of many aspects of reform.

- Those pressing for a maximalist agenda could gain control of the political system as a result of democratization and *glasnost*—as happened in Czechoslovakia in 1968—and force Gorbachev out.

- Should a sharp polarization of the leadership prevent it from acting resolutely to deal with a growing crisis, the prospects would increase for a conservative coup involving a minority of Politburo members supported by elements of the military and KGB. The prospects of a unilateral military coup are much more remote.

- If ethnic problems mount, consumer and worker discontent grow, and divisions in the leadership prevent it from acting decisively, organized political opposition could threaten the regime. Under these conditions, opposition groups could come to share power, as Solidarity did in Poland in the early 1980s, or individual republics might win de facto independence.

To get through this difficult period, the Soviet leadership can be expected to continue to place a high premium on creating a stable and predictable environment—minimizing the possibility of threats to Soviet interests from abroad. East-West relations, especially with the United States, will be particularly important. To help ease the strain on the economy and improve the prospects for delivering on promises to the consumer, the Soviet leadership will continue to vigorously pursue arms control and seek ways to reduce military spending.

Gorbachev can be expected to seek more foreign policy successes to enhance his legitimacy, build his personal prestige, and distract attention from domestic problems. For this and other reasons, he can therefore be expected to maintain a very high profile in the international arena, continuing to advance major foreign policy initiatives. At times, however, domestic crises—some of which may not be visible on the surface—will probably distract the Soviet leadership from foreign policy. This could result in temporary reversals on specific issues, or unexplained periods of indecision—such as occurred during the US Secretary of State's October 1987 visit to Moscow in the midst of the Yel'tsin crisis—when the Soviet leadership failed to set a date for a summit.

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Scope Note

The 26 March Soviet election again demonstrated that Gorbachev has released forces within the Soviet system that may prove very difficult to control and could destabilize the political system. This speculative paper examines the prospects for political instability in the Soviet Union, focusing on the next five years. It is intended to warn policymakers that, while current developments in the USSR need not lead to political instability, similar developments in other countries have sometimes done so. It analyzes the factors that make political systems unstable, the relevance of these to the current situation in the Soviet Union, and what will determine if it moves in the direction of greater or lesser stability. Various scenarios that would have major implications for the United States are presented. Some are of low probability but are offered to acknowledge the difficulty of predicting the long-term outcome of a situation highly in flux.

This paper does not make a systematic presentation of the evidence upon which its judgments are based but draws on a broad range of ongoing and finished research that has been done in the Office of Soviet Analysis and the Office of Global Issues. The study also draws on the findings of a two-day SOVA/OGI conference on the "Prospects for Instability in the Soviet Union" that brought together leading specialists on political instability and Soviet domestic affairs.

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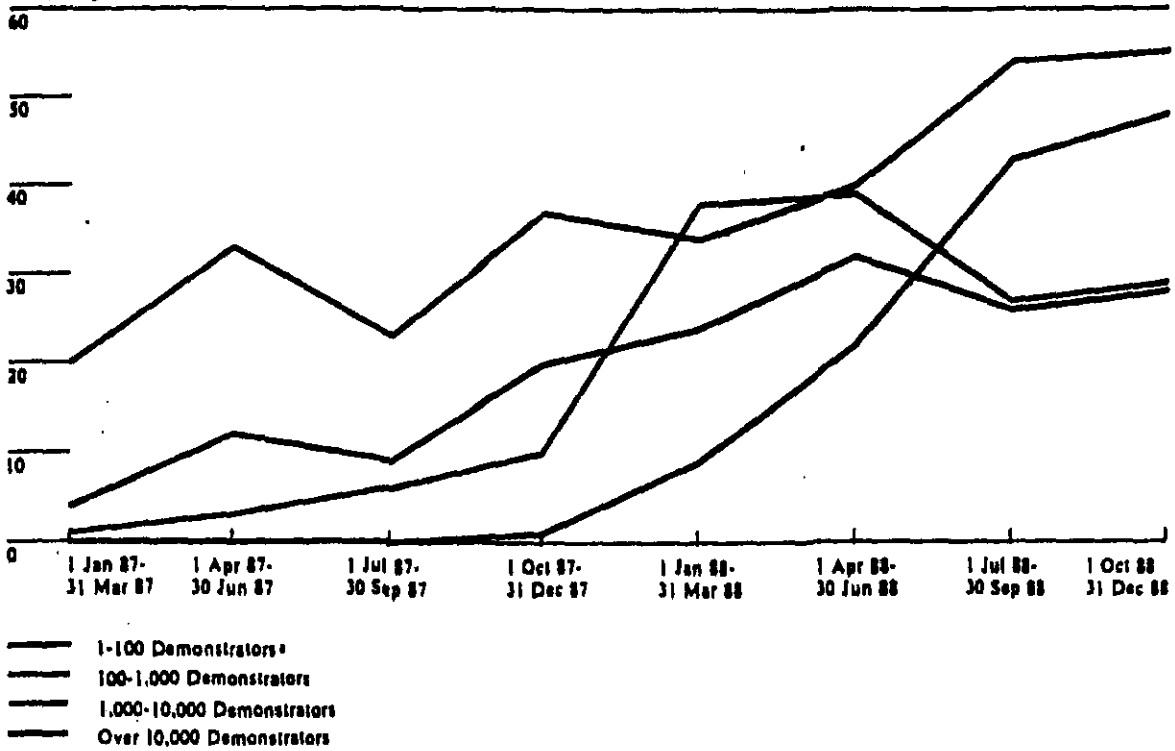
Figure 1
USSR: Distribution of Demonstrations, by Time and Size, January 1987-December 1988



* Approximately 18 percent of the reports of demonstrations did not include the numbers of demonstrators involved. These have been grouped in this category.

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Rising Political Instability Under Gorbachev: Understanding the Problem and Prospects for Resolution

Nothing is more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in all those who profit by the old order.

Niccolo Machiavelli

A System Under Stress

By taking the Soviet Union down the road of radical reform, General Secretary Gorbachev has opened Pandora's box. He clearly hopes that, by shaking up the system, he can rouse the population out of its lethargy and channel the forces he is releasing in a constructive direction to build a more dynamic and competitive system. So far, however, economic performance has continued to stagnate, there is a widespread perception that living conditions are deteriorating, and political turmoil and popular unrest have sharply increased. As a result, the Soviet system is less stable than it has been at any point since Stalin's great purges in the 1930s. There is little prospect of relief in sight.

Over the past two years, incidents of political unrest in the USSR, ranging from benign, small gatherings to major acts of political violence, have sharply escalated (see figure 1). Since January 1987, there have been over 1,200 political and economic demonstrations, strikes, and work stoppages. Half the incidents were motivated by nationalism, involving up to 1 million people in Armenia, 800,000 in Azerbaijan, and several hundred thousand in each of the Baltic republics.

This new political activism is taking place largely outside Communist party control. Emboldened by *glasnost*, Soviet citizens are organizing groups that could form the basis of a political opposition and advancing a wide range of demands that essentially run against the party's interests. The most dangerous of these are the nationalist movements that have blossomed in many republics. Having seen their quality of life stagnate under Gorbachev, many Soviet citizens are becoming increasingly skeptical of reform, seeing it more and more as a threat to the secure existence they recall they enjoyed under Brezhnev. These developments are increasingly polarizing the members of the elite over the future course of reform—creating the danger of a divisive split in the leadership and making Gorbachev's continued hold on power far from certain.

The Soviet leadership embarked on this potentially hazardous course because it believes that the old system was failing and that, in the long run, it would have been more dangerous to do nothing. Frightened by the specter of the workers revolt in Poland in the early 1980s, even Brezhnev and his cronies began to see the potential for similar upheavals in the USSR. In early 1982, for example, then party Secretary Chernenko said that the "harsh lesson" of Poland shows that "crises" can develop in other Communist countries if the party becomes divorced from the masses. By the time Gorbachev came to power in 1985, there appeared to be a growing consensus in the Politburo—including orthodox leaders such as Yegor Ligachev—that the Soviet economic and political system was becoming unstable. In mid-1987 Gorbachev explained the need for radical reform by arguing that it had become increasingly clear over the past two years that the failure to resolve "growing contradictions" in the Soviet system was bringing it to the verge of a "crisis."

The Soviet leadership's assessment that the system was failing was based in part on the economic slide that began under Brezhnev. The Stalinist economic model of ever increasing inputs of labor and capital with little concern for efficiency and productivity was becoming increasingly less effective as labor supply growth slowed, ever larger expenditures were required

to exploit natural resources, and the inefficiencies inherent in central planning became more acute as the economy grew. Probably even more alarming to the Soviet leadership was the system's inability to encourage innovation and keep pace with increasingly rapid technological changes, leaving Soviet industry further and further behind the cutting edge of world standards. It became clear to the leadership that, unless these trends were reversed, the Soviet Union would become a second-rate power and that increasing economic stringencies could undermine political stability (see figure 2).

These economic difficulties were compounded by changes taking place within Soviet society that were weakening several props to the system, giving rise to increased public discontent about internal conditions and putting pressure on the system for change.[1] The optimism Soviet citizens had in the 1960s had been replaced by an ever increasing sense of malaise:

- Corruption, abuses of privilege, and unfulfilled promises under Brezhnev increased popular cynicism, helped to erode the legitimacy of the regime, and increased alienation among the population.

- As a result of the information revolution and the general increase in the level of education, the Soviet leadership in effect lost its ability to shape public perceptions by controlling the flow of information. As a result, Soviet citizens became more aware of the greater freedoms and higher standards of living enjoyed elsewhere, fueling expectations for improvements in their quality of life.

- An increasingly large segment of the population had no personal memory of the Stalinist era, helping to make it less respectful and fearful of authority.

- A "youth bulge" (20 percent or more of the population are between the ages of 12 and 24) was occurring in the Caucasus and Central Asia, reducing opportunities for these young people, making many of them restless and dissatisfied.[1] In the Baltic, the influx of Russians and the low birthrates for the indigenous nationalities were heightening concerns about national survival.

[1] See DI Intelligence Assessment [redacted] April 1986, *Domestic Stresses in the USSR*.

Sources of Instability

While the kinds of increased political turmoil and popular unrest now going on in the USSR have often been effectively managed elsewhere, they have also led to radical shifts in a regime's policies, secessions of particular regions, or revolutions. There is no clear-cut formula for predicting whether unrest will lead to a change in a regime or government or force more radical policy changes by the incumbent government. The process by which observable challenges to government authorities and policies becomes an increasing threat to a regime's survival is highly dynamic and depends on a variety of actors and country-specific circumstance. Nonetheless, academic studies and CIA research have identified a number of factors common to cross-national patterns of political change that have proved useful for monitoring the stability of specific countries. A closer look at these provides a useful framework for assessing the prospects for dramatic political change in the Soviet Union.

Popular Discontent

Discontent generally rises when popular expectations and a regime's ability to satisfy them are far apart. Feelings of anger and frustration develop as people perceive a gap between what they get and what they think they should get. Although they are difficult to measure, these feelings of unmet expectations can be generated by a number of changing circumstances:

- A decline in the quality of life.
- Conditions that cause popular expectations to rise faster than a regime's ability to satisfy them, such as unrealistic economic promises by the leadership.

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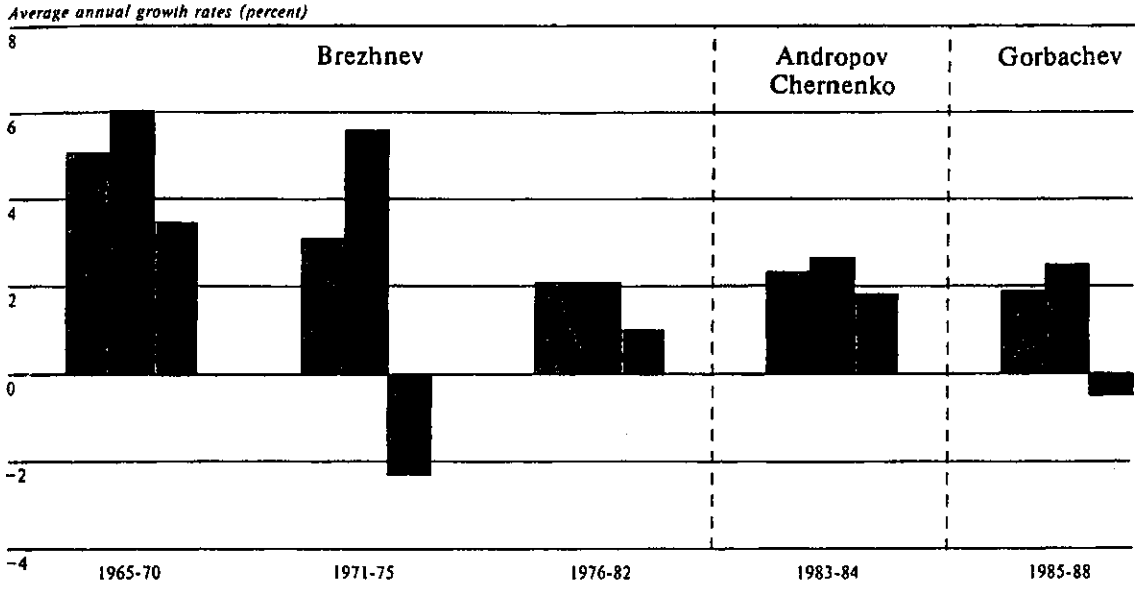
Figure 2
USSR: Economic Performance Under Gorbachev and His Predecessors

Average annual growth rates (percent)



* Excludes farm products used within agriculture and purchases by agriculture from other sectors.

Unrest, Instability, or Dramatic Political Change?

In this paper a clear distinction is made between unrest, instability, and dramatic political change:

- Unrest. *Strikes, demonstrations, and other manifestations of popular discontent are likely to be factors contributing to political instability, but the mere presence of unrest does not mean that a system is unstable or vulnerable to dramatic political change.*

- Instability. *A system is unstable when conditions exist that have the potential to result in a dramatic change in its political institutions, policies, or leadership. A political system becomes unstable as a result of a process in which significant demands and pressures are increasingly made on it and to which it fails to respond effectively.*

- Dramatic political change. *This is the end result of political instability. It could be change from below brought about by a revolution or the secession of a particular region. Members of the elite sometimes carry out dramatic change from above, such as political or military coups, or abrupt changes in the regime's policies to prevent such outcomes or to preserve their own interests. These outcomes are not mutually exclusive. For example, a reactionary coup could be a major factor ultimately contributing to the success of a revolution.*

- Policies that violate "implicit bargains" between the government and population or specific groups, such as the freedom to retain cultural identity or job security.
- Elite actions that alienate the general populace, such as excessive corruption or disregard for traditional practices.
- Growing inequalities, especially when people see members of their own socioeconomic group gaining much more quickly than they are.
- Social mobilization produced by modernization, including urbanization, increases in literacy, education, and media exposure that increase demands for popular participation.

Although leaders frequently undertake reform to alleviate growing discontent and adapt political, economic, and social institutions to changing conditions, reform often exacerbates discontent and class conflict. As the rules are changed, new challenges arise from groups who perceive their interests are being threatened, including elites who have the resources to conspire against the government to preserve their own power. The longer changes have been put off and the greater the gap between the existing institutions and the needs of a society, the more comprehensive and traumatic those reforms need to be. If political structures do not adapt and provide legitimate channels through which demands can be made on the government, other unofficial organizations will probably arise, challenging the government.

The presence of minority ethnic groups in a society makes it more difficult to govern because such groups tend to see their interests as different from those of the central authorities. Such tension can be quickly aggravated when changes take place in the status quo, fueling competition among ethnic groups and heightening expectations for greater autonomy. Ethnic groups are easily mobilized because of their common identity that cuts across class and generational lines.

The skill of the leader is critical to the success of reform. A successful reformer must be a master politician because it is extremely difficult to control the process of change, achieving a gradual transformation that does not produce convulsive changes that get out of control. Moreover, a reformer must balance a wide variety of conflicting interests, waging a two-front war against conservatives defending the status quo and radicals pressing for even more sweeping reforms. Reform carried out simultaneously on all fronts, such as that Gorbachev is trying to bring about, has rarely succeeded because too many opponents are mobilized. To prevent this, successful reformers, such as Mustafa Kemal in Turkey, have dealt with only one aspect of reform at a time, without suggesting that further reforms might be down the road.

Conference on Political Instability in the USSR

The Office of Global Issues and the Office of Soviet Analysis held a two-day conference last December that brought together leading academic experts on political instability and Soviet domestic affairs to explore the prospects for instability in the USSR. This issue was examined from various perspectives, including theories of social and political change, comparative case studies, the historical track record of instability in Communist countries, and alternative scenarios of dramatic political change in the USSR.

Although all participants expect continued unrest in the Soviet Union in the foreseeable future, they were sharply divided over whether this is likely to threaten the stability of the regime. Those who directly linked stability to the continued dominance of the party tended to be apocalyptical, arguing that the party will either contain unrest through divide-and-conquer tactics or an outright coercive crackdown or the system will collapse. Most of this group believe a prerevolutionary situation exists in the USSR because ethnic, economic, and intellectual instability poses a real threat to the party's monopoly, and they argue that, therefore, a coercive crackdown is only a matter of time. In contrast, those who see as possible an evolution away from a one-party monopoly believe the Soviet system's tolerance for unrest is much higher. They tended to see instability as a necessary condition for political, economic, and social reform and believe it is recognized as such by the Gorbachev reform coalition.

Most agreed that ethnic unrest is the greatest threat to stability and the one most likely to force a response from the Soviet leadership in the near future. The nationalism of the Baltic peoples was often seen as raising prospects for the breakup of the Soviet empire. Many agreed that the spread of interethnic violence typified by that in Nagorno-Karabakh is likely to spur organized terror against the state. This could pose a grave threat to reform by uniting the elite and public in a conservative reaction.

Participants identified a number of indicators that would suggest that mass- or elite-based pressure in the USSR is becoming sufficient to make possible a major change in the regime, in leadership, or in policy:

- *The emergence of multiple movements for autonomy, especially if this embraced the Ukraine or the large Central Asian republics.*
- *The near total breakdown of the economy, arising, perhaps, as a result of inflation induced by price reform, worsening shortages, and the breakdown of rationing and other distribution mechanisms.*
- *Class strife, as private property and visible class distinctions in both the city and countryside reappear.*
- *Gorbachev's loss of confidence and failure to provide a guiding vision, sparking a loss of credibility among the elite and populace.*

Collective Action

Regime-threatening instability requires that popular discontent be mobilized into action. Without organization, disaffected members of society usually remain passively alienated and overall system performance is likely to decline, but antiregime activity is not inevitable. If collective action is successful, a sort of "multiple sovereignty" can emerge, with the opposition in effect sharing power with the regime—similar to the role played by Solidarity and the Catholic Church in Poland before the imposition of martial law in 1981.

Several factors are particularly important for building an effective opposition that can establish its own legitimacy and effectively challenge a regime, including:

- A program that has broad popular appeal and is increasingly incompatible with the goals of the existing regime and has leaders who can articulate them.

- Coalition building with other influential groups in society. This can be facilitated by the emergence of a charismatic leader around whom they can rally.
- Acquisition of resources that can be applied to steadily increase pressure on the government to meet escalating demands.

Trigger events, such as natural disasters, assassinations, or sharp changes in the international environment, can sometimes compress the process of destabilization by highlighting performance problems of the government and rapidly mobilizing a discontented population. This can happen even if the opposition does not appear to be well organized and the government does not appear to be making mistakes. Mishandling of earthquake relief in Nicaragua, for example, was decisive in bringing down the Somoza regime.

Shortfalls in Regime Capabilities

The success of collective action depends largely on the opportunities provided by the regime. A government that fails to make progress on stated policy goals, equivocates and postpones key decision, splits over policy—including how to deal with opposition—and begins to question its own destiny sows the seeds of its demise. Polarization of the elite during times of mounting popular challenges increases the possibility that some members may withdraw their loyalty from the regime and join in a coup or make common cause with opposition groups.

Opposition can sometimes be defused by coercion or concessions, but force can also inflame unrest and concessions can spur further demands. Coercion applied inconsistently, brutally, or nondiscriminately usually increases feelings of popular contempt. For coercion to be effective, the coercive forces must remain loyal to the regime and be strong enough to deal with potential challenges. The existence of coercive capabilities and a belief by the masses that the regime is willing to use them will often have a deterrent effect. However, if a regime hesitates in using its coercive forces—as with the Shah of Iran against the Islamic Revolution—the opposition will become emboldened.

If the legitimacy of a regime is increasingly called into question by the population or the elite, the prospects for instability are much greater. Exactly what constitutes legitimacy is unique to each situation. Nevertheless, there are some common elements that are often present, including a regime's existence over time, its ability to withstand major crises, the legitimization of myths or ideologies, individuals' personal stake in a regime's existence, a regime's ability to provide for the welfare of its citizens, or its ability to protect national security. In Poland, for example, extensive sociological studies of why the country has been in a state of crisis since 1980 have found the regime's lack of legitimacy among most key groups in the population to be a critical factor.

Often a decline of legitimacy among the political elite—such as questioning its own political or ideological heritage—leads to a decline in popular legitimacy, helping to transform a lack of popular support for a regime into effective opposition. The regime's loss of the intelligentsia's support often sparks a rapid erosion of legitimacy among the masses and elite. The elite's legitimacy is especially important in countries where the masses have played a minimal role in the political process, such as in Communist states. The elite's questioning of the legitimacy of the Communist system was a key factor contributing to the crises in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968.

External Factors

By reinforcing the strengths and weaknesses of key actors in a political conflict, foreign states or institutions can have an impact on the internal stability of another country. Moral, financial, or military aid can enhance either the regime's or opposition's claims of legitimacy as well as their ability to defend their interests. A government's concerns about international reaction to abuses of human rights or the use of force can limit its ability to deal with the opposition. Sometimes regimes use foreign policy initiatives to divert popular attention from domestic troubles. Successes can help bind societies together, but failures can hasten a regime's loss of legitimacy and lead to its demise.

Gorbachev's Reforms

Gorbachev is effectively trying to destroy the Stalinist political, economic, and social system and replace it with one that is more competitive, dynamic, and efficient. The Stalinist system was forged out of a period of unprecedented turmoil, chaos, and suffering that lasted from the 1917 revolution until Stalin's death in 1953, during which political stability was maintained largely through terror. Transforming that system promises to be traumatic, particularly since change has been put off for so long. Although the terror was ended by Khrushchev, its legacy has endured, contributing to citizen resistance to speak out or overtly resist authority—although this situation is changing rapidly as Gorbachev relaxes repression.

Gorbachev has embarked on a comprehensive program of political and economic reform that leaves few aspects of the Soviet system untouched. As he has become more aware of the seriousness and the close interconnection among the diverse problems he faces, Gorbachev has broadened and radicalized his program. Although he is probably aware of the danger of trying to reform simultaneously on all fronts, he apparently sees this as the only hope of accomplishing his objectives. Most Soviets who have analyzed previous Soviet reforms—Khrushchev's as well as Kosygin's economic reforms of 1965—agree that they failed because they were not comprehensive and simultaneous.

Gorbachev is no doubt aware that he is playing with fire, even though he has publicly denied conservative charges that his reforms are "socially destabilizing" or will "lead to chaos." Instead, he clearly hopes that he can control the process of opening up and keep it within definite bounds to prevent it from getting out of hand—and in the long run improve the system and make it more stable. At the same time, he realizes that reform will also produce some undesirable consequences. The General Secretary told an informal meeting with Soviet writers in March 1988 that "various elements—from 'monarchist, to anarchist'—are going to appear." His willingness to tolerate such consequences suggests that he is more confident than many of his colleagues of the system's ability to withstand stress and his own ability to manage change.

Although the net effect of the reform process in the short term is destabilizing, in some limited respects it is already beginning to enhance the long-term stability of the system by allowing pressures that built up during the stagnation of the Brezhnev years to be released and giving many Soviet citizens hope that things can improve by working through the system, increasing the regime's legitimacy. The stability of the Soviet system will face its severest test over the next several years as the leadership struggles to develop new institutions to replace the political, economic, and social foundations of the old Stalinist system, which are in the process of being destroyed. During this early period, the leadership will be confronted with a dangerous combination of the unresolved problems inherited from Brezhnev and the confusion and turmoil caused by the transition to a new system, with few of the benefits from the reforms. Moreover, the aspects of reform that are potentially most destabilizing—the economic and political—are only in their early stages. As they are put in place, not only is Gorbachev likely to face fierce resistance or even sabotage from those with a vested interest in the status quo, but there will no doubt be some unanticipated negative consequences.

Economic

To create a dynamic economy, Gorbachev has been pushing a set of economic reforms that would dismantle the rigidly centralized economy and replace it with one more reliant on market forces. Although the reform program's full implemention is by no means certain, the transition is already proving to be highly disruptive and some Soviet specialists are warning that it could result in economic chaos and a sharp drop in production. Indeed, fear of such negative consequences appears to be causing hesitation on the part of the leadership about moving ahead. Gorbachev faces a clear dilemma: if economic reform becomes stalled, stagnation is likely to continue; if economic reform moves ahead, it will be highly destabilizing.

The reform program would almost certainly increase unrest in critical industrialized regions—such as in the Russian and Ukrainian Republics—where the population has so far been relatively passive, as the following factors come into play:

- *Shakedown period.* Problems encountered during the early stages of Gorbachev's reforms suggest that serious disruptions would be unavoidable in shifting the entire economy to a more market-oriented basis. Economic managers would need time to learn how to operate under the new conditions, new economic relationships would need to be formed, bottlenecks would be created, mistakes would be made, and unanticipated problems would be encountered.

- *Price reform.* Decontrolling retail prices is a critical, but highly controversial, aspect of economic reform that now appears to be stalled. Price increases were critical factors precipitating crises in Poland and would almost certainly increase popular discontent in the USSR, particularly if there is no compensation for price hikes on food and other basic essentials. A Soviet scholar warned in the press that price reform could result in "uncontrollable inflation, chaos, and social excesses" and likened it to "carrying out heart surgery while wearing a blindfold."

- *Unemployment.* To improve economic efficiency, plants will need to reduce the number of excess workers. Although Gorbachev has promised that no one will be without a job, many people may be required to take less attractive positions—at lower pay or in undesirable areas with labor shortages—increasing popular discontent.

- *Increased inequality.* Social tensions are likely to increase as some individuals "get rich"—by Soviet standards—through the private sector or increased rewards from the state. The presence of this wealthy group will increase feelings of relative deprivation among the rest of the population, spurring demands for wage increases and increasing discontent over price hikes. There has already been widespread resentment of those enriching themselves in the private sector. For example, a cooperative pig farm near Moscow was set afire by jealous neighbors accusing the owners of being "a new bourgeois, NEPmen and Kulaks."

Political

The political reforms that are being introduced are intended in part to create official institutions that can channel the increased social mobilization produced by modernization in a constructive direction. At the same time, the reforms are also giving legitimacy to the grievances of disaffected groups and opening up to them political forums from which they can challenge regime authority.

Glasnost has helped to reengage intellectuals and has served as a safety valve, providing a vent for frustrations that had built up under Brezhnev. At the same time, it is also encouraging activities the regime finds undesirable, especially the mobilization of groups advancing ideas inimical to state interests—as in the Baltics and the Caucasus. Conservatives, such as party secretaries Yegor Ligachev and Viktor Chebrikov, have warned that *glasnost* is undermining the stability of the system by encouraging such political activity and damaging the regime's legitimacy by calling into question the entire direction of past Soviet policies. Speaking to Soviet writers in July 1987, Ligachev charged that the reforms "have washed up scum and debris." Gorbachev and his allies counter that the political ferment released by *glasnost* is basically healthy and that the undesirable fallout can be managed.

The electoral reforms being introduced are intended to channel this new political activism into official institutions—in addition to providing Gorbachev with a vehicle to help break the power of the party and state apparatus and to enhance his own power as the new president. The potential exists, however, that the

reforms could provide legitimate platforms for political opposition, eroding central control. Already the republic soviets elected under the old system in the Baltics and in the Caucasus have openly defied Moscow—in Estonia by asserting their authority to veto national legislation and in Armenia by demanding the annexation of the Nagorno-Karabakh region—and local officials in other regions are becoming increasingly assertive. As the reforms—multiple candidates, nominations from below, secret ballots—increasingly take hold, local party organizations and soviets (especially in the non-Russian areas) could become increasingly difficult for Moscow to control. There is some reason to believe this may happen:

- To the apparent surprise of the Politburo, many leading party officials were defeated in the 26 March election of delegates to the new Congress of People's Deputies. The most stunning upset was that of Leningrad party boss Solovyev, a candidate member of the CPSU Politburo who ran unopposed but whose name was crossed off the ballot by a majority of voters.

- Some election meetings became sharply polarized and very confrontational. A meeting in Moscow in January deteriorated into chaos after it was suddenly canceled because of a technicality. Supporters of Vitaliy Korotich, the outspoken editor of a reformist Soviet weekly, cried foul but were shouted down by a well-organized group of self-described patriotic Russians who raised banners carrying anti-Semitic symbols and calling Korotich "the scum of *perestroyka*."

[redacted]

- The central leadership lost control over the electoral process as a result of similar, but short-lived, electoral reforms in Poland in the early 1980s. Many official candidates, including members of the Politburo, were rejected in party and state elections.

[redacted]

Popular and Elite Reaction to Gorbachev's Reforms

Polarization of the Elite

The comprehensive nature of Gorbachev's reforms has polarized the Soviet elite, alienating many of those who stand to lose as a result of the changes that are taking place as well as those who are afraid of their consequences. So far, these divisions have not limited Gorbachev's ability to take bold action, but they could at some critical juncture in the future. They also increase the likelihood of a conservative coup—such as the one in 1964 against Khrushchev—aimed at protecting the interests of the elite being threatened by his policies. Gorbachev appears to be aware of this danger

[redacted]

Party conservatives fear that the cure being offered by Gorbachev is worse than the disease, arguing that his reforms may produce a crisis of their own. In addition to their criticism of *glasnost*, Ligachev and Chebrikov appear to be uneasy about the pace and scope of the entire reform process. Conservatives are playing on fears of instability to weaken Gorbachev by raising the specter of runaway reforms leading to chaos. In July, Gorbachev complained of their efforts to depict *perestroyka* as "socially destabilizing." Some reformers even charge that conservatives are intentionally trying to promote unrest to undermine Gorbachev (see inset).

Gorbachev is also being pressured by a growing constituency for more radical reforms. Boris Yel'tsin—the leading spokesman in this regard—has warned that the slow pace of change is the greatest danger to the system, arguing that, without more radical reforms, "there is a risk of losing the helm of government and political stability." His overwhelming victory in the March election over a more traditional candidate—89 percent of the vote—has greatly increased his political stature and given him an official

Reformers' Fears of Conservative Provocations

"Gorbachev's enemies wanted blood to flow there [the Caucasus] in abundance, wanted to cause him a whole series of Budapests. . . . The only way to overthrow Gorbachev is to create serious disturbances in the country, to create a situation in which a 'strong man' becomes necessary. Pamyat acts as a destabilizing factor. I am convinced that on their own they would not stage a coup d'etat, but they could create a situation that has to be crushed by force. Unless we achieve tangible economic results, any kind of social demagoguery could influence people greatly. This is the real danger."—Vitaliy Korotich (La Vanguardia, *28 August 1988*)

"The risk [that things will get out of control] does exist. I do not want to draw any parallels, but in my opinion the suppression of the Prague Spring was caused by Dubcek's loss of control over the situation. The conservative elements in Prague conjured up the danger of anarchy. Today, the conservatives in the Soviet Union want to intimidate us in the same way."—Yevgeniy Yevtushenko (Stern, *4 August 1988*)

"Antirestructuring forces . . . are doing everything they can to destabilize the situation [in the Caucasus], not disdaining playing openly here on people's national feelings and speculating on real difficulties. Their aim is one: to halt restructuring, to hinder its implementation."—Mikhail Gorbachev (TASS, *3 December 1988*)

"Many people feel (and it is hard to dispute it) that some person or persons have a hand in industry's unsatisfactory work, very skillfully building up the volume of negative emotions and simultaneously creating—at times artificially—the shortages which are for some people a source of power and economic prosperity. This 'suspicion' is based on examples from 'period of Khrushchev's ouster from power.'"—Mark Zakharov (Izvestiya, *3 February 1989*)

Unclassified

platform for his views. Over the past year, he has developed a growing nationwide following, the media have been increasingly discussing radical options—like a multiparty system—and unofficial groups challenging Moscow have gained strength.

Gorbachev has made significant progress in consolidating power, but the potential still exists for a debilitating split in the leadership. He has tried to depict himself as shunning both extremes, lashing out in a January speech at the "cavalier" attitude of "ultraleftists" as well as conservatives who fear the reforms will "destroy everything and everyone," but his sympathies clearly lie with the former. Within the Politburo, Gorbachev and his closest allies, party secretary Yakovlev and Foreign Minister Shevardnadze, make up the reform wing. Party secretaries Ligachev and Chebrikov—the two chief critics of reform—along with Ukrainian party boss Shcherbitskiy make up the Politburo's conservative faction. Other members of the Politburo have not clearly allied themselves with either group (see inset).

While the influence of the conservatives on the Politburo was weakened as a result of the September 1988 plenum, Gorbachev's opponents have a strong base of support within the party, many of whose members feel that his reforms threaten prerogatives they long considered sacrosanct:

- Privileges that have come to be taken for granted by party members are being curtailed. Access to special stores and services is being reduced sharply, and party members' immunity from prosecution has been ended. Gorbachev called for opening up highly desirable jobs traditionally reserved for the *nomenklatura* to people outside the party.

- Many party officials no doubt resent having to participate in contested elections and having to listen to criticism from below. They are also concerned that their influence and prerogatives will be reduced by Gorbachev's efforts to limit party interference in the management of the economy and to revitalize the soviets.

Gorbachev's Politburo Today

Yakovlev: *Came into leadership as Gorbachev protege . . . strong proponent of radical reform.*

Shevardnadze: *One of Gorbachev's strongest supporters on both domestic and foreign policy . . . unorthodox statements on ideological underpinnings of foreign policy have aroused objections from Ligachev.*

Ryzhkov: *Has played leading role in economic reform . . . may be more orthodox on political and social issues . . . clashes with Ligachev reported . . . personal stature enhanced by prominent role in dealing with Armenian earthquake.*

Medvedev: *New ideology Secretary in forefront of "new thinking" on foreign policy . . . views on domestic reform are not as radical as those of Yakovlev . . . vigorously asserts regime's line on limits to glasnost and dangers of political extremism.*

Slyun'kov: *Economics Secretary who apparently supports radical restructuring.* [redacted]

Nikonov: *Keeps to narrow focus on agriculture . . . strongly supports Gorbachev line on family contracts and land leasing.*

Zaykov: Secretary and Moscow party chief who has staked out centrist position on key reform issues . . . may have some industry oversight. [redacted]

Vorotnikov: *One of three Politburo members appointed before Gorbachev took power . . . moderate on reform . . . lost some authority in shift to Russian Republic "presidency" in October.*

Shcherbitskiy: *In Politburo since 1971 . . . Ukrainian leader voices support for reform, but his past record is much more orthodox.*

Chebrikov: *As KGB chief, expressed strong reservations about democratization and openness . . . as party Secretary for legal policy, may now be in position to hamper legal reform program . . . raised hackles in Estonia with derogatory remarks about nationalist movement.*

Ligachev: *With "second secretary" powers removed, less able to hinder Gorbachev's programs . . . still views political reform as dangerous, disruptive, unnecessary . . . opponents of reform may still look to him as spokesman.*

[redacted]

- Many party members are clearly alarmed at increasing talk of the possibility of a multiparty system that could end the monopoly of power by the CPSU. [redacted]

Bureaucratic foot-dragging and outright resistance to change—most recently evident in the March plenum on agriculture—have been key factors hampering the success of the reforms. Large segments of influential groups within the elite, while not monolithic, have good reasons to oppose reform:

- As a whole the current Central Committee appears to be fairly conservative. About 60 percent of its members gained their positions under Brezhnev, and

[redacted]

over 20 percent are "dead souls" who have lost their jobs under Gorbachev but will retain their vote until the next party congress in 1991.

- Many military officers appear to resent Gorbachev's reduction in the military's status and planned cutbacks in its size and budget. Not only do they see their career opportunities and privileges being limited, but some appear to be concerned that these changes will jeopardize Soviet national security.

[redacted]

However, some military officers believe that, by strengthening the economy, Gorbachev's reforms will benefit the military in the long run.

- There appear to be strong concerns within the KGB about the destabilizing effects of Gorbachev's reforms, especially in the directorates responsible for internal security. Many senior KGB officials fear that *glasnost*, greater toleration of dissent, and proposals for a more law-based society could sharply reduce their ability to guarantee the stability of Soviet society. Many also apparently believe that Gorbachev wants a reduced role for the KGB and are concerned that this will threaten their jobs and privileged positions. Elements in the KGB concerned with gathering foreign intelligence may welcome the additional opportunities created by Gorbachev's foreign policy successes.[1]

- Economic managers accustomed to operating strictly within the plan are uneasy about having to rely on the market and show a profit. A Soviet economist indicated publicly in December that "managers wouldn't be surprised if the reform program were discarded overnight." [redacted]

Popular Attitudes

There is widespread and growing frustration among Soviet citizens except for those in the Baltics and the Caucasus, but so far there is not the kind of outrage that is likely to mobilize large segments of the population. In many parts of the country workers and peasants have greeted the changes that are taking place with indifference. Most workers and managers have been unenthusiastic about new opportunities for enterprising individuals in the economic area, acting instead in a conservative manner and as a brake on radical reform. A fundamental problem for Gorbachev is that the population seems to be more interested in political than economic activism, and he needs the reverse. [redacted]

Reform has fueled expectations for improvements in the quality of life, but, from the standpoint of the Soviet worker, Gorbachev's economic program has been a near disaster. People are having to work harder but so far have gotten few material benefits for their efforts, and there are growing signs of popular frustration with reform:

- In January, Gorbachev acknowledged that many people believe that restructuring has not produced any economic or social benefits, and "in many respects the situation has even deteriorated."

- A poll of 6,000 in Leningrad, published in December 1988, found that only 5 percent thought *perestroyka* had improved economic conditions, 33 percent thought it made them worse off, and 30 percent said they were "frightened" by it.

- A letter in a Moscow paper recently complained that, "as regards the products in the shops, the era of stagnation seems by comparison with today a time when things bloomed."

- Many Soviet citizens equate greater democracy with greater license for antisocial behavior, and the crime rate was up by 18 percent in 1988. In February, Soviet legal scholars told US counterparts that terrorism in the USSR had caused 60 deaths in the past four years. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

The problem of rising, but unfulfilled, expectations is likely to get worse, at least over the short run. [redacted] there are increasing reports of shortages and consumer discontent throughout the USSR. [redacted] A deputy editor recently told Embassy officials that experience shows that, if the agricultural situation does not improve, there will be chaos, a "crash," and "blood." Recognizing this problem, the Soviet leadership has begun to increase the priority of the consumer sector, but this new emphasis will further spur expectations, making improvements even more imperative. Gorbachev has ruled out massive imports of consumer goods from the West, which would provide some relief in the short term, but this issue is still being debated by Soviet economists. [redacted]

Gorbachev's reforms are, in effect, rescinding implicit promises made by the regime to the population. As a result of the increasing economic stringencies at the end of the Brezhnev era, the "social contract"—job security, lax workplace discipline, and expectations of a rising standard of living in return for political passivity—formed with the population was beginning to fray. Gorbachev wants a new "contract" that promises an improved quality of life only to industrious Soviet workers. As a result, many Soviet citizens may not fare as well in the near term. The workers and peasants have developed a negative attitude toward work and would prefer the security of a marginal standard of living guaranteed by the state to the uncertainties of the market. If plant closings, wage cuts, price hikes, and greater economic inequality become the norm, industrial unrest is almost surely going to increase. Former party secretary Anatoly Dobrynin revealed to an Embassy official in 1987 that the party's best political officers were being sent to problem enterprises to "educate" increasingly dissatisfied workers and to avert strikes. [redacted]

Although Soviet workers have so far been relatively passive, growing frustration over economic conditions is making fertile ground for serious industrial unrest. Since January 1987, 56 strikes over purely economic demands have been reported. Increasing discussion of the right to strike in the Soviet press and the results other groups—most notably ethnic minorities—are achieving by social protest are likely to increase the prospects for unrest among Soviet workers. Soviet party officials told Westerners in September that the unions are worried about the prospect of workers' strikes, especially if there are price hikes. Even in less permissive times, Soviet workers have taken to the streets en masse over economic issues: in 1962, price increases on meat and butter spurred massive riots in Novocherkask, during which hundreds of people were killed; in 1977 there were widespread disorders throughout the USSR over food shortages, including a major work stoppage in the city of Tula. [redacted]

The suppression of dissent of all kinds under Brezhnev increases the possibility that pent-up emotions and frustrations among the population could suddenly explode and get out of control, as is happening in the Baltics and the Caucasus. One Soviet sociologist expressed concern about this in a 1987 article, writing, "I am afraid [the mob will take over]. Afraid because, as a sociologist, I see a growing mood of hostility and intolerance in our social psychology, a readiness to persecute in defiance of legal norms. I know very well—fortunately from literature—how inexorably and suddenly rampant 'democracy,' with an admixture of crude legal procedures, turns into tyranny and political terror." [redacted]

Regime Legitimacy

In some sense, the Soviet elite is going through a crisis of legitimacy. In breaking with its Stalinist legacy, many of the values and goals that provided the raison d'etre of the regime for generations are now being declared bankrupt. Soviets are openly asking whether the changes proposed amount to a rejection of Communism and a return to capitalism. The famous letter

[redacted]

last year by Nina Andreyeva charged that this is producing "nihilistic sentiments," "ideological confusion," and a loss of "political bearings." So far, the regime has not developed an effective legitimizing myth to replace the one it is destroying.

Although, under Brezhnev, the popular legitimacy of the regime suffered as a result of stagnation and corruption, under Gorbachev the recognition of problems and admission of past mistakes have enhanced the regime's legitimacy among some elements of Soviet society, especially the intelligentsia. The regime has done a good job protecting national security interests, achieving superpower parity with the United States under Brezhnev and now enhancing its image abroad under Gorbachev. The Soviet leadership's inability to perceptibly improve the quality of life of its citizens—particularly when they compare themselves to citizens of capitalist countries—continues to seriously damage the legitimacy of the Communist system.

Cultural Factors

The degree of legitimacy enjoyed by the regime varies greatly among the diverse nationalities of the Soviet Union. While there is widespread popular cynicism, the Soviet population—especially in the Slavic areas—has been basically apolitical, making it less likely that this cynicism can be readily translated into political opposition. The regime's legitimacy is strongest among Russians because of their domination of the political system, history, and culture of the USSR. It is also stronger among the other Slavic groups—the Ukrainians and Belorussians, who have a closer cultural affinity with the Russians—than it is in the non-Slavic republics, especially the Baltics. Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were forcibly annexed during World War II, and some natives continue to view the Russians as a colonial presence. The Soviet regime has gained some legitimacy by its longevity, and, except for the Balts, very few Soviet citizens can remember any other system.

Even among the Russians, cultural traditions suggest there is a potential for a violent upheaval. The Russian elite traditionally has had a great fear of instability and has been suspicious of change, equating it with disorder. Although the Russian population has been passive for long periods of history, it has sometimes responded emotionally and erupted into violence when it perceived its interests as being threatened. Russian history is marked by major eruptions of peasant and urban violence, including the revolutions of 1905 and 1917 and major peasant revolts in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Nationality Problems

So far, nationality problems have posed the most visible threat to the stability of the Soviet system. Encouraged by *glasnost* and democratization, minority nationalities have become increasingly defiant of Moscow, articulating demands for greater political, cultural, and economic autonomy. Incidents of nationality-related unrest have increased sharply and show little sign of abating. The Caucasus has been in a state of turmoil since February 1988, with over 1,500 casualties, including 83 deaths: Armenians are getting financial and moral support from coethnics abroad; Azeris are making clear their anti-Russian sentiments by carrying portraits of Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini and Islamic banners; arms are readily available in both republics despite efforts to confiscate them, increasing the prospects for insurgency; and there are over 300,000 refugees as a result of the turmoil. The pre-Soviet flags of independence are now flying in the three Baltic republics, and Popular Front organizations there have gained broad support and are advancing programs that promote de facto independence from Moscow.

To help gain legitimacy for Soviet rule, Moscow has responded with major concessions, particularly in the Baltic republics, where it has sanctioned the activities of the Popular Fronts. By allowing national groups greater autonomy, Gorbachev clearly hopes he can satisfy their grievances while engaging them in the reform process. Developments in the Baltics, however, are encouraging other minorities to press for similar rights, and in recent months Popular Fronts have emerged on a smaller scale in all the other republics. Already, demands of different nationality groups appear to be reinforcing each other, making it extremely dangerous for the regime to make concessions to one

group it is not willing to give to all. Nationalist groups are increasingly coordinating their activities. Last year, for example, groups from the Baltic, Ukrainian, Belorussian, Georgian, and Armenian republics met on three occasions. In February, self-described representatives of the "national liberation movements" from these republics adopted a "Charter of Freedom of the Enslaved People of the USSR."

Gorbachev's hopes of buying local support with greater autonomy is a dangerous gamble, encouraging increasingly radical nationalist activism over the past year. It is far from clear that Moscow will be able to control this process, and it could unleash centrifugal forces that will pull the Soviet Union apart or create such serious tensions among nationalities that the ensuing social and political chaos will undermine Gorbachev's reforms. Already in the Baltics, local authorities no longer appear to be setting the political agenda but have been largely co-opted by the nationalist movements, creating the danger that Moscow could lose all effective control of these regions, short of coercion

The growing assertiveness by non-Russians is stimulating a backlash among Russians, increasing the possibility that nationality problems could undermine political stability. There are sizable Russian populations in all of the republics and, by accommodating nationalists' demands, Moscow is courting increased tensions between native populations and Russians that could spark communal violence with much broader ramifications than the simmering conflict between Armenians and Azeris. Russian nationalist groups, including radical ones such as Pamyat, are growing bolder and gaining support in response to the assertiveness of non-Russian minorities

Russian nationalist sentiments appear to be particularly strong in the military, the KGB, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD). Party secretary Ligachev has been openly appealing to these sentiments and would clearly prefer to keep non-Russian national groups on a much tighter leash.

Gorbachev appears to be aware of these dangers.

Gorbachev believes that unrest in these republics may destroy the reform process if he is forced to send troops in to restore order. Apparently reflecting such concerns, Gorbachev ally Aleksander Yakovlev warned in Latvia, it is "very important not to give the conservatives an excuse to say: 'Look at the nationalists, they are getting out of hand.'" If nationality unrest spreads, especially to the Ukraine, the largest non-Russian republic, it could be the catalyst for a serious political crisis.

Political Opposition

Outside of the Baltics and Caucasus, organized opposition capable of challenging the regime is still very weak. Nevertheless, groups are being formed in other areas that could grow into an organized political opposition. Over the past two years, political activism outside the Communist party and other official organizations has increased sharply. According to *Pravda*, over 60,000 unofficial groups have sprung up, ranging from innocuous hobby clubs to groups of activists pressing for radical political reforms. Groups with political agendas are springing up and gaining strength outside the Baltics. A coalition of dissidents and reformers has come together to form a "Democratic Union," which seeks to become a legal opposition. Over the past year, popular fronts have been created in many Russian industrial cities, where they reportedly have stronger support among workers than they do in Moscow and Leningrad because of the poorer living and working conditions.

These activities are being tolerated by the regime because it hopes to use them to help build popular support for change. As the experience of the Baltics

has shown, however, it is far from certain that their activities can be channeled in a direction that the regime considers to be constructive. Many of them are becoming increasingly political, and some are openly calling for a multiparty system. Popular fronts are increasingly assuming the role of an opposition party, and they are trying to use the new election laws to advance their own candidates for state positions. Moreover, they are increasingly working together to pursue common objectives, helping new groups get started and holding joint meetings. According to a member of the Moscow Popular Front, for example, the Estonian Front has printed leaflets for the Moscow group since it does not have access to a press.

So far, these groups are only in the early stages of organization that could lead to collective actions threatening to the regime. Outside the Baltics and the Caucasus, none of them has attracted a massive following or is able to mobilize the resources needed to mount a serious challenge. While the efforts of the popular fronts to work together is an important step, each unofficial group is still basically pursuing its own agenda. Nevertheless, developments over the past year have moved in the direction of increasing the fronts' potential for collective action, and these capabilities are continuing to grow.

Regime Capabilities

The Soviet leadership possesses tremendous capabilities for controlling unrest and preventing instability from threatening the regime. Before the opposition could pose a serious challenge, it would need to become much more organized and widespread. The regime's capabilities could be neutralized, however, if it became polarized or if it miscalculated.

Leadership Skill

Gorbachev appears to have the kinds of political skills that are needed to steer the Soviet Union through this turbulent period.[redacted] He has shown himself to be a masterful politician and demonstrated the ability to build political support for a much more radical agenda than anyone thought possible. He has proved to be extremely effective at keeping his opponents off balance, finding their weaknesses, and building up his own political power. Unlike Khrushchev, he appears to have kept his colleagues directly involved in making decisions, giving them a personal stake in their successful implementation and reducing his own exposure. These skills will be a major asset for maintaining cohesion in the leadership.

At the same time, Gorbachev is a risk taker and could seriously miscalculate in a critical situation. He is strongly committed to his vision of change, and his past record suggests that, if he perceives that his program is not meeting his expectations, he will persist or even escalate his efforts, pushing for even more radical solutions. While he will almost certainly change tactics, he is unlikely to back away from his fundamental goals or settle for the status quo. His apparent impatience and determination to push reform simultaneously on many fronts could alienate so many groups that even Gorbachev's political skills will not be able to prevent a coalition from forming against him.

Coercive Capabilities

The traditional instruments by which the Soviet state has controlled most aspects of its citizens' lives since the days of Stalin are still largely intact. As it demonstrated last year in the Caucasus, even in the era of *glasnost* the Soviet leadership is willing to resort to force to maintain order when other means have been exhausted. Not only does this give the regime an effective means for controlling society and restoring order, but the potential threat of such intervention also serves to help deter the population from joining in radical antiregime activities. While the leadership can rely on these coercive capabilities to deal with isolated outbreaks of unrest, any broad-scale reliance on repressive methods to maintain stability would seriously undermine the reform process.

[redacted]

More than any other single institution, the KGB is charged with maintaining the political stability of the Soviet system. It does this by closely monitoring activities that could harm the interests of the state, thwarting opposition groups that could threaten state security, and providing the regime with intelligence. Although Gorbachev's reforms have made the KGB's job more difficult by curbing its extralegal activities, its extensive capabilities are still basically untouched.

The MVD has the primary responsibility for maintaining order through its Internal Troops and local police forces. It is on the front lines in controlling strikes, demonstrations, and other social disorders. Its authority was reaffirmed in a July 1988 decree that gives the Internal Troops broad rights to make arrests, search homes without warrants, perform spot identity checks, and cordon off areas of unrest.

The MVD uses politically reliable, specially trained and equipped security troops to augment KGB and local police forces to control unrest.[1] MVD troops have played a large role maintaining order in the Caucasus over the past year. They are a more effective and reliable security force than the local police, who are more likely to collaborate with rioters from their own communities—as events in the Caucasus have shown. Only a small number of MVD troops are equipped to deal with popular unrest, however. To enhance this capability, special police squads were established last year in Moscow for deployment during "mass events." If faced with simultaneous riots in different regions, Moscow would probably need to reinforce MVD forces with paratroops from the Ministry of Defense (MOD), as the leadership did during the 1988 riots in the Caucasus.

Although the Soviet military has played a secondary role in controlling unrest, it is potentially the most important source of coercive power available to the regime. Only it has the massive armed force that would be needed to control widespread, simultaneous outbreaks of unrest. Faced with such a crisis, the Soviet armed forces could probably help the security forces restore some semblance of order through the imposition of martial law. If the Soviet military became widely involved in maintaining domestic order, however, it would jeopardize its ability to carry out its mission abroad. Such duty, too, would be unpopular with the military leadership because it reduces readiness, hurts morale, and damages the military's image. Most military leaders would probably agree that widespread unrest that requires the ongoing intervention of the armed forces would be a highly undesirable consequence of reform that would threaten Soviet national security.

Dissatisfaction with Gorbachev's program by significant elements within the military and KGB could undermine the Soviet leader's ability to use these institutions to prevent instability. Well-placed members of the KGB hostile to Gorbachev could allow or even encourage increased turmoil that would be politically damaging to him, or fail to warn him of potentially negative consequences of his actions. In the event of a sharp division in the leadership, the military and KGB might side with conservative forces committed to restoring stability. While both institutions have been thoroughly conditioned to accept the primacy of the party and it is highly unlikely that they would intervene in domestic politics without the support of members of the leadership, they played a critical role in the ousting of Khrushchev.

State Control

Short of resorting to force, the Soviet state's highly centralized control over all aspects of society gives the regime important levers it can use to help maintain stability. While the private sector is growing, the state still controls the vast majority of jobs, prices, wages, housing, supplies of food and consumer goods, and most other key aspects of the economy. This gives the state potential to move quickly and decisively to change economic policies or conditions that may be contributing to unrest. Similarly, its control over the social, cultural, and political spheres allows it to offer concessions in these areas to try to placate disaffected groups.

The state's virtual monopoly of the mass media, transportation, and the communication system also enhances its ability to maintain stability. Even without explicit censorship, editors serve at the discretion of the regime and place limits on what can be published, and the state can limit the circulation of unorthodox literature by controlling access to copying machines and printing presses. Sergey Gregoryiants, for example, has been repeatedly harassed for trying to publish his independent journal *Glasnost* and has been unable to reach a mass audience. Given the vast size of the Soviet Union, the regime could severely restrict the flow of information from one region to another—by resuming the jamming of Western radio broadcasts and tightly reining in *glasnost*—reducing the possibility of organized widespread unrest in the absence of elite participation.

Outcomes

All of the social, political, economic, and ethnic challenges faced by the Soviet leadership are closely interconnected. Problems, or even the solutions to the problems, in one area are likely to exacerbate those in others—for example, both economic stringencies and economic reform would put greater stress on Soviet society. Ultimately, the greatest threat to Soviet political stability would be if problems in different areas began to play off each other, spiraled out of control, and created a situation from which the leadership could find no easy way of extricating itself without seriously compromising the reform process. The prospects of such a challenge would greatly increase if the regime were simultaneously confronted with crises on multiple fronts.

The next several years promise to be turbulent. There are too many variables and unforeseen events to predict whether Gorbachev will be able to control the process he has started, if it will increasingly come to control him, or if fears of where it is leading will result in a conservative retrenchment. Clearly, a wide range of outcomes is possible:

- *Continuing Gorbachev's course.* If Gorbachev's reforms begin to produce tangible results and, if he is lucky, he will remain in power and prevent any of the potential problems he faces from getting out of control, while continuing to move his reforms ahead. As Soviet reformers are recognizing, however, it will probably take generations before his program can hope to succeed.

- *Conservative retrenchment.* A growing perception within the leadership that reforms are producing undesirable consequences that are seriously endangering the stability of the regime could lead to a conservative reaction. This would probably involve a transfer of power, with a majority of the Politburo turning against Gorbachev—similar to the ousting of Khrushchev in 1964. If Gorbachev perceived this danger and were willing to lead a conservative retrenchment, however, it is possible he could remain.

- *Reactionary coup.* Should a sharp polarization of the leadership prevent it from acting resolutely to deal with a growing crisis, the prospects of a conservative coup would increase. This would probably involve a conspiracy of conservative leaders, the military, and the KGB and could result in the imposition of some form of martial law to help restore order. The perpetrators would probably justify their actions by claiming that "counterrevolutionary forces" were undermining the leading role of the party—the excuse used to intervene in Czechoslovakia in 1968. Although the possibility of the military acting on its own is remote, should it come to believe that the Politburo were no longer capable of controlling the situation—because it lacks the political will or is too polarized to reach agreement—it could carry out a coup in conjunction with a small group of conservative political leaders.

- *A radical takeover.* As a result of democratization and *glasnost*, those pressing a maximalist agenda could gain control of the political system—as happened in Czechoslovakia in 1968—and force Gorbachev out. This would be most likely if pressure for change from below increases sharply and Gorbachev is increasingly perceived as a moderate.

- *Change from below.* If ethnic problems go unsolved, consumer and worker discontent continue to grow, and divisions in the leadership prevent it from acting decisively, organized political opposition would probably increase. Such opposition could become a serious threat to the regime if the leadership failed to use its coercive capabilities to crack down or seriously miscalculated, or if isolated groups with different agenda join in support against the regime. Under these conditions, a well-organized political opposition with a broad and solid base of support might effectively come to share power with the Communist party—as happened with Solidarity and the Polish Communist Party before the imposition of martial law. If the political climate were sufficiently volatile and opposition groups developed a mass following, a leader, or faction within the leadership, might join forces with the nonparty opposition and try to take power. If power became sufficiently fragmented, for a period no organized political force might be capable of running the Soviet state, resulting in anarchy and chaos, not unlike that which preceded the 1917 Russian revolution. As part of this process, Moscow might lose control of the periphery, and the Soviet Union could become some sort of loose federation. [redacted]

Critical Variables

There are a number of critical factors that will help determine whether the Soviet Union becomes more or less stable:

- To combat alienation and engage the population in the reform process, Gorbachev needs to start showing some tangible results. Probably nothing would do more to enhance the political stability of the Soviet Union than if Soviet consumers began to see improvements in their quality of life.

- The Soviet leadership needs to contain serious nationality problems within the Caucasus and the Baltics. It especially needs to prevent a Russian backlash, with discontented Russians leaving the republics or actively joining together to resist the indigenous nationalities. It is particularly important for the regime to maintain stability in the Ukraine, a major industrial and food-producing area and by far the largest non-Russian republic.

- Gorbachev needs success in revitalizing party and state institutions, especially creating institutionalized mechanisms for resolving political and social conflict to preclude the development of viable alternative "parties" or political action groups.

- Gorbachev needs to maintain a strong working coalition in the Politburo and prevent divisions from impairing its ability to deal decisively with difficult issues. He also needs to maintain the loyalty of the KGB and the military, particularly among the leadership of those institutions.

- To allow potentially destabilizing changes to move ahead, the leadership must feel that it is operating in a secure international environment and that other countries will not take advantage of the Soviets' potential vulnerabilities. [redacted]

While the Soviet Union could slowly become less stable if conditions in these critical areas deteriorate, it is also possible that some sudden trigger event could quickly precipitate a crisis and undermine stability. The latter could be the result of a miscalculation on the part of the leadership—such as misjudging popular reaction to a price hike—or the result of some chance event beyond its control—such as shootings at a demonstration or a major ecological disaster that could be blamed on the leadership. [redacted]

The sudden death of Gorbachev, whether by assassination or natural causes, could also greatly increase the prospects for instability. His strong personality and political skills appear to be key factors holding his program together, and there does not appear to be anyone in the wings who could easily take his place. His demise would probably further polarize reformers and conservatives, resulting in a weak compromise leader or a prolonged succession struggle. The resulting paralysis at the top could create the opportunity for political opposition to organize and gain strength or for a reactionary group to seize power. [redacted]

[redacted]

Scenarios for Dramatic Change

If political ferment in the USSR continues to grow and fundamental economic, social, and ethnic problems are not resolved, it may only be a matter of time until Gorbachev is simultaneously faced with multiple serious challenges. Extrapolating on current trends produces several hypothetical scenarios that could lead to dramatic political changes over the next several years:

- *The regime is faced with a need both to address massive budget deficits and brake the economic cycle, which precludes meaningful change. On the advice of the KGB that popular reaction can be contained, the regime moves ahead with selective price hikes on food products that economists believe are necessary. A major factory in the Urals, where there are rumors of impending layoffs, goes on strike, and soon other workers in the city join in, effectively bringing the city to a standstill. Word spreads quickly via Western broadcasts and unofficial networks, and soon the strike spreads to diverse regions of the country. In many regions, strike committees are supported by the local Popular Fronts, which use their network to help form a national strike committee. The regime is reluctant to use force against the workers, and, as industrial production plummets, the country enters a vicious cycle of negotiations and strikes, resulting in an unmanageable situation, not unlike Poland before the imposition of martial law.*

- *Having won a seat in the Congress of Deputies, Boris Yel'tsin gains increased legitimacy among the Soviet population on his platform of antielitism and consumer rights. He is increasingly looked to as an antiestablishment symbol by a diverse range of groups pressing for greater autonomy. These groups have been growing in strength, both in terms of their popular support and their organizational capabilities. At a nationally televised Congress session, Yel'tsin demands that the leadership turn its rhetoric about reducing the role of the party into action and allow elective bodies to vote on critical resource issues, including defense spending, but the speech is taken off the air before he finishes. The full speech is printed within days by a reformist weekly and widely circulated. The 1917 slogan "All power to the soviets!" is revived, as demonstrations take place in major cities through the USSR calling for an end to party manipulation of the soviets. In several republics and key provinces, party leaders are voted out, as chairmen of the local soviets and members of the party elite are demanding a reassertion of central control before this practice goes any further. There is a growing fear in party circles that a movement to recall Gorbachev as President and replace him with a nonparty candidate might succeed at the next meeting of the Congress.*

- *Nationalist movements in the republics continue to gain strength, especially outside the Baltics and Caucasus. Indigenous nationalities are increasingly making life difficult for Russians in their republics by restrictive language requirements. Russians, in turn, have begun to organize on a broad scale, both in the Russian and other republics. Ligachev, who has become increasingly outspoken as a defender of Russian interests, is assassinated by a non-Russian, culminating a series of terrorist attacks against Russian officials. Russian groups demand a crackdown against nationalist movements and a reassertion of central authority, staging demonstrations in several republic capitals. Violent clashes break out in several cities between Russians and non-Russians. Discipline breaks down in one city, and Russian troops fire into a crowd, killing several dozen non-Russian students and wounding many others. Terrorist attacks on Russians sharply increase, and nationalist groups in all of the republics are demanding an end to Russian colonialism and*

de facto independence. Their ongoing protest strikes have brought the country to a virtual standstill.

- *The size of the Soviet armed forces has been cut, and troop strength has been reduced in Eastern Europe. Reform movements have gained strength throughout the Bloc, and the multiparty systems that have been introduced in Poland and Hungary have put the Communists on the defensive, forcing them to make major concessions to public opinion or risk being eclipsed by other parties. In Hungary, the Parliament approves the Social Democratic Party's call for a neutral foreign policy and withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact. Within days similar measures are introduced in the Polish Parliament and are taken up by opposition groups in the German Democratic Republic and Czechoslovakia, where large, well-organized demonstrations are held demanding neutrality and a diversion of defense expenditures to civilian needs. In Moscow, conservatives are calling for intervention to restore order and protect the gains of socialism, and the governments of the GDR, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania have made a joint request to Moscow to intervene, offering military support. Large rallies in support of East European autonomy organized by Soviet peace groups and Popular Fronts are taking place in Moscow and other major Soviet cities. The military and KGB are not confident they can restore control in Eastern Europe and control the demonstrations they expect back in the USSR protesting such an action. The Politburo is sharply divided over how to respond and continues to argue as the situation deteriorates at home and abroad.* [redacted]

Implications for the United States

The next several years promise to be turbulent ones in Soviet domestic affairs, regardless of the path followed. There will almost certainly be continued turmoil within both Soviet society and the leadership. Such ferment is not only a natural byproduct of the reform process, but it would also result from any effort to turn that process back. Consequently, continued or even increased turmoil in itself cannot be taken as an indication that Gorbachev or the political stability of the Soviet Union is in jeopardy. Indeed, it could be an indication that the reform process is moving ahead and tackling the difficult issues that need to be addressed to build a more effective system (see table). [redacted]

In the near term, Gorbachev can be expected to continue a foreign policy line that will create the most favorable international climate for the changes he is trying to bring about in the Soviet Union. Consequently, he will continue to place a high premium on creating a stable and predictable international environment, minimizing the possibility of threats from abroad to Soviet interests. To this end, the leadership is likely to continue to take a more flexible approach in most areas of foreign policy, and the prospects for the USSR becoming engaged in regional conflicts will remain relatively small. [redacted]

East-West relations, especially with the United States, will be particularly important. To help ease the strain on the economy and improve the prospects for delivering on promises to the consumer, the Soviet leadership will continue to vigorously pursue arms control and seek ways to reduce military spending. More important, the Soviet leadership will need to feel confident that other nations will not try to exploit the USSR's internal weaknesses during this vulnerable period. A perception that the West was actively trying to do this—particularly in the field of military competition—would undercut Gorbachev's arguments

[redacted]

Sources of Instability: A Scorecard for the USSR

	Not Evident	Low	Medium	High
Popular discontent				
Quality of life			X	
Increased inequality		X		
Broken promises			X	
Systemic failure				X
Reform				X
Ethnic tensions				
Baltic republics				X
Caucasus				X
Central Asia		X		
Russian Republic			X	
Ukrainian Republic			X	
Other			X	
Collective action against the regime				
Reason for discontent			X	
Formation of organizations			X	
Mobilization of resources			X	
Coordination of activities by diverse groups		X		
Regime capabilities				
Inept leadership	X			
Elite polarization			X	
Elite legitimacy		X		
Popular legitimacy			X	
Inability to use coercive forces	X			

[redacted]

that Soviet security can be maintained by diplomatic, rather than military, means and could threaten his reform process. [redacted]

Gorbachev can also be expected to seek more foreign policy successes to enhance his legitimacy, build up his personal prestige, and distract attention from domestic problems. As long as his reforms continue to produce results, he can be expected to continue to seek these successes by the conciliatory route. Gorbachev can therefore be expected to maintain a very high profile in the international arena, continuing to advance major foreign policy initiatives. At times, however, domestic crises—some of which may not be visible on the surface—will probably distract the Soviet leadership from foreign policy. This could result in temporary reversals on specific issues or unexplained periods of indecision—such as occurred during the US Secretary of State's visit to Moscow in October 1987 in the midst of the Yel'tsin crisis, when the Soviet leadership failed to set a date for a summit.

[redacted]