THE AFTERMATH OF THE
TWENTY-SEVENTH CPSU CONGRESS:
LEADERSHIP CONFLICT
AND SOCIO-POLITICAL CHANGE*

The proceedings of the Twenty-Seventh CPSU Congress put the seal on
the Gorbachev leadership's strategy for rejuvenating Soviet society. The
problems it attempts to confront are not just a consequence of Brezhnevian
inertia. Domestic malaise and decreasing effectiveness abroad, symbolized by
technological stagnation and the difficulties of maintaining strategic parity,
have their roots in the structures of Soviet economic and political life. Pow-
erful bureaucratic interests seek to maintain the command system of physical
planning which cannot produce the desired economic results.

The Twenty-Seventh Party Congress provided insights into Soviet politi-
cal life absent since the Khrushchev years. This article attempts to use that
evidence to indicate the nature of domestic policy and the factors shaping it
one year later. It argues that the policies announced so far constitute only a
short-term strategy which will eventually be superseded by a long-term one
yet to be decided by the outcome of leadership conflict. That conflict involves
the substantial differences between Gorbachev and his more conservative col-
leagues over the nature of socio-economic problems and appropriate remedies
to them. It is being fought out within the context of a continuing process of
leadership recruitment which may, but need not necessarily, provide opportu-
nities for the General Secretary to increase his authority over some of his
colleagues. One year after the congress Gorbachev remains the leading mem-
ber of a team he did not select; he has yet to become a dominant leader.

While appearing cautious the short-term strategy is seeking to make the
distribution of goods and services within Soviet society more meritocratic.
This is changing the relative socio-economic positions of some occupational
groups. It is also changing the relationship between the Communist Party-
state and Soviet society: the former is less willing to guarantee minimum
welfare to all sections of the latter irrespective of work performance. This ar-
ticle argues that the leadership of the Party-state is attempting to enhance its
directive capacity over Soviet society by increasing the significance of legit-

* Research for this article was undertaken while I was Charles E. Culpeper Post-
doctoral Fellow in Sociology-Anthropology at Oberlin College. I am grateful for the
support of the Culpeper Foundation. The assistance of Robert DiGiacomo in the collection
of data on Central Committee members, made possible by a Dana Foundation Internship,
is also gratefully acknowledged.
imacy and support in the state/society relationship. To achieve this it is fostering acceptance of, and appealing to pre-existing desires for, greater social inequality and the justice of distribution more according to performance and less according to need.

Short and Long-Term Strategies

The Gorbachev leadership seeks to increase the rate of Soviet economic growth by improving the technical quality of producer and consumer goods. To this end, personnel at all levels are being induced to work more assiduously within existing institutions, improved central direction of the economy is being sought through reorganization of some ministries, and local officials are being encouraged to take initiatives to solve immediate problems.

Four strands of policy attempt to improve the working of existing and reorganized institutions: (i) a demand for more open and honest evaluation of functional effectiveness in all spheres; (ii) the sanctioning of criticism of ineffectiveness within "higher" institutions by those in "lower" ones; (iii) the removal of corrupt or inefficient personnel who "continue to work in the old way"; (iv) an attempt to connect material rewards more closely to an occupation's or an individual's contribution to leadership goals.

Neither exhortations to work better nor the sanctioning of criticism from below are new. They both existed in the Brezhnev era. The short-term strategy, however, has made four changes in the rules of conduct of Soviet political life. The Brezhnevian exhortation to "trust the cadres" no longer applies. Party and state officials have become legitimate targets of criticism. Second, criticism can be directed at non-economic activities such as Party ideological work. Third, glasnost' (frankness) is increasing the risks of deception and seeks to make officialdom appear more responsible to citizens. Finally, the gradual demise of Brezhnev's "social compact" between citizens and state is the most potent and the most speculative source of socio-political change introduced to date.

Brezhnev's distribution policies provided incremental increases in everyone's standard of living and reduced income differentials within and between the working class and peasantry. In return, citizens were expected to acquiesce to the direction of Party-state functionaries who enjoyed security of tenure irrespective of performance. Now, security, traditional privilege, and limitations on inequality are being played down in the kindling of a Soviet technological revolution. If successfully implemented, the Gorbachev leadership's intention to link rewards more closely to performance will reduce the job security of worker and bureaucrat alike, increase involuntary unemployment and social inequality, and may eventually produce the displacement of some traditionally privileged groups such as the "upper