

Notes for Presentation at the Politburo session, December 27, 1988

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/THESES/

1. Our views on socialism, its role and its potential, its very essence and substantive content on the eve of the 21st century are developing along with the renewal, which has begun -- sometimes trailing it and sometimes getting ahead of it.

This has to do with the internal sphere, where today the understanding of the essence of perestroika, of its objectives and tasks, has moved far ahead in comparison with that of April 1985.

It has to do with the international course as well, where the new political thinking, which has been announced substantively is only now beginning to assume physical dimensions, and to be filled with concrete content – with the concepts of moving ahead in a number of directions, with the formulation of concrete long-term goals for such a movement, and finally, with practical shifts, and with the very first results.

2. The interconnectedness of these directions – the internal and the international – is a dialectical one, and one which is extremely important for the success of not only foreign but especially -- I would like to emphasize this -- domestic policy. Why?

Not only because a well thought-out, rational foreign policy would allow savings of considerable sums, for example in terms of how much it costs for us to assure our ability to defend ourselves.

Not only because it would open additional possibilities for participation in the international division of labor, and consequently in a more rational management of the economy, although both of these are important.

But also because it allows [us] to fully turn on the spiritual factors of development in our work – the societal, group and individual factors.

A person learns how much he is worth, his qualities, his knowledge and skills, learns about his character, and learns about himself only in communications and interactions with other people.

In just the same way, the state discovers its national self-respect – and we are lacking this acutely -- a sense of national dignity, but not national arrogance or, to the contrary, inferiority, only through an active policy, only through interactions with others in the world arena, in all possible spheres of such interaction.

A person forms and develops also only through interactions with others, with society as a whole. And in principle, in the same way, although in a much more complex way, of course -- a society develops through its interaction with other societies and peoples.

A person cannot live in a society and be free from it. All efforts to assert such “freedom” are doomed, and at the same time they can lead either to certain deep internal malformations of personality, or to certain deviant or even criminal behavior.

However, the isolation – or self-isolation – of a nation from the world community also brings negative results, although these accumulate and reveal themselves not in a matter of years, but decades. In particular, many of the negative aspects in the policy and psychological outlook of the USA in the world arena were the consequence of their isolationism from the many centers of world policy during a considerable part of their preceding history -- which they have not yet fully overcome.

3. We have not yet fully assessed the scale and the consequences of the spiritual autarchy which predominated in the life of our country during more than half a century.

Yes, imperialism tried to isolate the first socialist country in the world in all respects, to erect barriers against our ideological and cultural influence, and to put us behind an “iron curtain.” And by doing that, to kill two birds with the same bullet: to isolate its own people from the “contagion of bolshevism” and to create myths about us with even greater ease.

They succeeded in doing that too easily. We helped them ourselves.

Stalin needed spiritual autarchy, because only in those conditions could Stalinism as a phenomenon develop and survive as a regime of personal power, inconsistent with the genuinely internationalist teaching of Marxism-Leninism.

And subsequently, spiritual autarchy became a comfortable cradle, in which self-adoration and communist arrogance on a national scale, dogmatism, scholasticism and stagnation enjoyed themselves.

Here we have to see not only the internal causes of stagnation as such, but also that considerable role which spiritual, economic and scientific and technological autarky played in its development. It did not help to preserve [our] ideological virginity either. Just the opposite, by encouraging stagnation, it was thus encouraging ideological ill-health.

In reality, genuine competition existed in only one sphere – the military one. Here the immediate contact of armaments encouraged us to rise to the level of world standards and sometimes even beyond them. This kind of situation -- from ideology to the economy -- could not be called normal from any point of view.

4. What is the main deficiency of the former political thinking, and of the practice based on it? It lies in the fact that it accepted a situation where socialism objectively found itself seemingly in confrontation with -- if not the rest of the world, then with a considerable part of it. It did not just accept it, but assumed that such a situation was natural.

We will not even mention the almost automatically confrontational character of our relations, approaches and policy, which resulted from that situation. That is quite obvious.

Let us think about what forms a further spread of socialism in the world could take in those conditions? I think we believe that it should still occur with the passage of time.

It could have been [the case] that one after another of the “weakest links” of capitalism, according to Lenin’s terminology, would have chosen the socialist path -- often after a most difficult and exhausting struggle for those countries and human souls. This is how it was actually happening. In the 1970s, many countries that tried to step

from early feudalism, and sometimes even from a tribal society, to socialism became socialist-oriented countries. With all respect to the aspirations of the people of those countries, and with all our readiness to help them on this road, we have to see that socialism as a system, as an ideology, is not made stronger by this kind of "world march" but is weaker as a result of it. It is a victory, but a Pyrrhic one.

Or it could also have been the result of certain violent developments in the more developed countries because natural processes there obviously did not lead to socialism as we understood it in the 1970s.

However, socialism is the natural and logical -- and not forcibly imposed -- future of humankind. And as such, it cannot and should not live in separation or in isolation, or self-isolation, from the world. And in this sense, as well as on domestic issues, [we had] the hyper-statist character of socialism, subsuming it under our state interests -- more precisely, under what we understood such interests to be inside the country and in the external sphere.

5. The new political thinking is shaking off the internal chains of this spiritual autarky. And by doing that, it is giving socialism back to the world -- a socialism that is genuinely creative, self-renewing, moving forward and consistent with common human interests, and not a caricature resulting from the self-inflicted distortions, shifts and deficiencies, which are magnified manifold in the propaganda that is hostile to socialism and to our country.

6. We have to analyze carefully what is behind the enthusiasm with which the world, including the West -- in contrast to some of our friends -- welcomed perestroika and the new political thinking. Here is the fatigue of confrontation -- yes, unquestionably. The attractiveness of the current Soviet leadership -- undoubtedly. The sympathies of our true friends -- of course. The genuine response of all honest, decent, progressive forces and people -- as well.

This is all true. But all this, in the good sense of the word, is a matter of convenience. But the reaction, the positive response, is very powerful and long-lasting; too stable to be explained only by elements of convenience. Therefore, the following conclusion would be in order: there are some causes that are deeper, that are hidden at first glance. What are those?

Let the political scientists respond. I would point out one of those [causes]: the need on the part of humankind as well as each person for a progressive ideal, for a realistic appeal for a better future, for a moral impulse toward purity and dignity.

All this was present in socialism in the period of its birth as a teaching and a political movement. All this was present in our socialist revolution. However, it was gradually lost under the influence of the two most important processes beginning from the end of 1960s, and especially in the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. The processes were the following:

-- The reaction of the external world to the work of revealing, analyzing and overcoming Stalinism, which we began but did not bring to completion. The point is not that what was said came as a shock. Much worse was the fact that the curtailing of the line of the XX and XXII Congresses did not provide a clear perspective on surmounting [Stalinism], but left the perception with many people in the world that Stalinism is

socialism as such. This perception seemed to have received a number of similar “confirmations” in the 1970s;

-- Stagnation inside the country, the degradation of foreign policy and, most importantly, the way we reacted to both.

A most terrible thing began to occur: the source of progressive inspiration in the world, which our country represented, began to dry out in many respects, was producing not refreshing but bitter and unusable “water.” The strengthening of conservatism in the West in that period was a consequence not only of the processes occurring in the depths of capitalist society, but also of the processes that were occurring in our country at that time. The unhealthy processes.

7. It is time to stop thinking in the categories of “here” and “there.” The interdependence of the world means also the interconnectedness of all the processes of domestic development. Although the ties [created by] this interdependence, of course, are very complex and not simple, still such interconnectedness is an objective reality.

World development is one single process. And to direct it, to exert not even a decisive but just a significant influence on it – and this is not a little thing indeed! – is possible only by participating in all the main directions of this development. One-sidedness, an equalizing, mechanical approach and emphasis on uniformity – all these qualities and categories are inconsistent with development. Neither in theory nor in practice. They are only consistent with stagnation.

8. In all these respects, the speech at the session of the UN General Assembly in New York is a watershed. It sums up all the practical and theoretical results of the new political thinking at present. The thinking, which is addressed first of all to us, and that is precisely why it is so attractive and effective externally. It does not propose any ready-made recipes for the world -- even though they could be the right ones and the fairest ones. No political slogans, even necessary ones. But it is the creative pulse of real life, living thought, of their intense and honest work.

And at the same time, the speech opens a new page in the new political thinking itself, opens it precisely because it stands on the experience of almost four years of transformations and renewal, on our new general political maturity, and on the breadth of our vision.

I now return to the question of the dialectics of the domestic and the international. It consists in the fact that large scale of our look at the internal problems is being shifted to all the others – which in its turn expands the theoretical and practical perceptions. It is also in the fact that our conviction in the correctness of the course which we began brings confidence in oneself, and in our abilities in general. At the same time it allows us to see additional possibilities in the international arena where we did not see them earlier, or where our concerns, stemming from an absence of experience and a healthy thought through calculated risk, were prevalent.

9. The main thing now is not to talk too much about the speech and its main points, not to bring them down to the level of customary, routine journalistic repetitions, but to implement its ideas and its very spirit consistently in each concrete presentation, action or act of our foreign policy.

And more: we have to seriously get involved in following through on the new political thinking, in explaining its concrete principles among our friends. We are not talking about encouraging them to repeat all our ideas and formulas -- this is what many of them are quite ready for. But we want their contribution to the new image, to the creative potential of socialism in the world to constantly grow and become more and more obvious, not only for us but for the entire world.

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Translated by Svetlana Savranskaya for the National Security Archive]