

## **The ‘Common European Home’ as part of Gorbachev’s New Political Thinking in foreign policy, and its relevance to represent a new diplomatic architecture in Europe**

**Cristina Carpinelli**

Gorbachev’s reform policy in the second half of the 1980s was sustained by three pillars. Two of them are well-known: glasnost and perestroika. The first concerned the campaign carried out by the Soviet leader to create openness and democratization. The second referred to the policy of restructuring the entire economy towards a system without barriers to the free market. The third pillar is probably the least known, but it was no less important for that: the “New Thinking” in foreign policy.

The “Common European Home” (CEH) as part of Gorbachev’s New Political Thinking in foreign policy was supposed to represent the new diplomatic architecture in Europe. The purpose of the CEH did not constitute a secondary aspect of perestroika: on the contrary, it was a crucial element in defining the meaning of this political project. The construction of the CEH was to be the answer to a great historical challenge: to show that it was possible to overcome the fault shaped in Europe by the Russian Revolution between liberal countries with capitalist economies and socialist countries with planned economies.

This project pointed towards a direction that suggested a progressive rapprochement between Eastern and Western European countries rather than a rejection of their differences. Perestroika clearly expressed the need to reform the socialist system based on principles of democracy and a more market-oriented economic policy modeled after Lenin’s NEP. The bipolar logic of the opposing blocs made democracy coincide with capitalism and socialism with totalitarianism, making it impossible to reconcile democracy and socialism and closing the way for any intermediate position. The project of creating increasingly close forms of political coexistence between the two Europes made it possible to carry out an unprecedented experiment: the attempt to achieve the peaceful coexistence of countries with different regimes, without depriving them of their autonomy, provided they all had democratic institutions and a market economy.

The new doctrine of Soviet foreign policy was presented during the 27th Congress of the CPSU (February-March 1986). Its cornerstone was precisely the peaceful coexistence of states with different regimes that had to be achieved through two approaches: the idea of the “unity of an increasingly interdependent and interconnected world” and the affirmation of the principle of “freedom of choice”, that is the right of each country to make sovereign choices. Gorbachev’s proposal for a CEH must be placed in this context. Within this broad framework, Gorbachev used the concept of a CEH, a symbolically powerful term – close to utopia – rather than a detailed plan for a new pan-European order. It was a plea for a united, peaceful, integrated European continent, where it would be possible to replace the traditional balance of forces with a balance of interests.

*The first approach: “the idea of the unity of an increasingly interdependent and interconnected world”.*

Based on Gorbachev’s speeches and writings, the CEH could be represented as composed of four different levels: the geopolitical order, based on the fundamental principles of the 1945 Charter of the United Nations, as well as on the provisions of the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, was the foundation of the Home. The first level was based on collective security and maximum disarmament. All countries had to be guided by the principle of “reasonable sufficiency” of military capabilities, and armaments had to be reduced on a reciprocal basis. The demilitarization of East-West relations (the transformation of military

blocs into political alliances that could actively contribute to the rapprochement) had to be the starting point for the development of Pan-European cooperation.

The second level represented the peaceful resolution of conflicts. This suggested that a doctrine of restraint should have taken the place of the doctrine of deterrence. The third level aimed to develop an economic agreement between the USSR and the EC and build a prospect for forming a vast economic space from the Atlantic to the Urals (recalling the statement by Charles de Gaulle), and the fourth level aimed to build a European cultural community, based on shared roots of civilization. Lastly, the CEH had to be thought of as a “community rooted in law”. During his several visits to Western Europe, Gorbachev spoke of his proposal for a pan-European legal community. It was high time, he asserted, for the successor generation to the leaders who signed the 1975 Helsinki Declaration to meet and review the options for a European Community in the 21st century, based on democracy, the rule of law, and human rights.

Gorbachev was looking towards a Europe with less confrontation and very much more cooperation, and he believed that the two systems (socialist and capitalist) had not only to learn to live together but to work together as well, moving towards “co-creation” and “co-development”. A Europe, founded on the acceptance of “interdependence”, could prove to be a Europe in which détente might be made to work.

In the official speeches of the Soviet leader, the conflict between socialism and capitalism was placed in the background. On October 1986, in a meeting with the Soviet writers, Gorbachev declared: “ideological and political differences should recede (...) first there is the priority of life and universal human values”. This view was most openly emphasized in his book *Perestroika and new thinking for our country and the world* (1987). In it, it is written: “Ideological differences should not be transferred to the sphere of interstate relations, nor should foreign policy be subordinate to them, for ideologies may be poles apart, whereas the interest of survival and prevention of war stand universal and supreme”. The challenges and threats’ global nature demanded that problems be solved through joint efforts. The cooperation had become an issue of survival, because of the threat of nuclear annihilation and the common ecological threats.

*The second approach: “the right of each country to make sovereign choices”.*

On October 22-23, 1985, a closed-door meeting of the members of the Political Advisory Committee of the Warsaw Pact countries was held in Sofia. On that occasion, Gorbachev stated that the USSR would respect the independence of the communist parties of Central and Eastern European countries. He abandoned the language of the “two camps” of Stalin and Zhdanov and declared that the “Brezhnev doctrine” no longer “works”: there is no collective responsibility, and there is no limited sovereignty. Each country and each communist party must be responsible for its policy towards its people and rely primarily on its strengths. On a special note, dated June 25, 1986, prepared for discussion at the Politburo, Gorbachev said: “It’s time for the brother countries to stop considering Moscow as a kind of conservative force that hinders the expected transformations”.

On May 8, 1989, the Soviet foreign minister, E.A. Shevardnadze, in an interview with the American magazine *Time*, declared that each state had the right to freely choose its path of development. Asked if he could imagine a scenario in which internal unrest in some Warsaw Pact country required Soviet intervention, Shevardnadze replied: “No, I cannot imagine such a scenario” [*Izvestia*, 05.08.1989]. On July 7, 1989, commenting on the changes in Poland and Hungary (where the communist parties had lost their unchallenged power on the political scene), Gorbachev said: “Every nation has the right to choose. That is the central point. If we do not recognize this, nothing good can be expected in

the future of international relations. Therefore, how the Polish and Hungarian people will dispose of (...) is their business" [*Pravda*, 07.07.1989].

On the first day of the annual summit of the Alliance of Seven Nations (7.07.1989), Gorbachev said: "There is a new spirit within the Warsaw Treaty, with moves towards independent solutions to national problems". And precisely with that spirit, Gorbachev launched a plan for a reform of the Warsaw Pact, with which the USSR decided to move away from those actions carried out in the past which placed the member countries of the Pact in the position of satellites rather than allies.

Certainly, Gorbachev's all speeches - aimed at the Warsaw Pact countries - were not presented as the antithesis of socialism, but as an attempt to reconcile democracy and socialism. He had not set out to destroy socialism, but to reform it. An American political analyst, R. Asmus, noted that "Gorbachev's vision of a CEH was predicated on the belief that reforms in Eastern Europe could be controlled and that reformist communist parties would continue to play an important role in their countries' politics" (*Foreign Affairs*, Spring 1990).

But unlike Gorbachev's plans, the Soviet line of "non-intervention" encouraged forces opposed to the regimes in power. These oppositions were mainly pro-Western and operated under the slogans of desovietization and desatellization. By the end of 1989, all the states of Central and Eastern Europe had experienced revolutions. Changes in Europe were imminent and European leaders were now engaged in a race to manage the transition to a new Europe, in a continent in flux, where Western Europe was dominated by the evolving EC, and the USSR had to come to terms with the already evident secessionist tendencies of the Warsaw Pact countries.

And yet, in Strasbourg (1989), although such a scenario, Gorbachev warned that there were limits to change in Eastern Europe: overcoming the division of Europe was not to be confused with overcoming socialism in Europe. There was no European unity along these lines ... this was a course for confrontation. At the same time, Gorbachev was adamant that 'overcoming the division of Europe' was not to be interpreted as an open season on socialism. During his visits to Western Europe, the Soviet leader reiterated several times that there was no design to decouple Western Europe from NATO or to detach West Germany from its western alliance. On November 29, 1989, M. Gorbachev arrived in Rome - Italy, on his way to the upcoming summit in Malta with President George H. W. Bush. He gave a speech the next day at the Rome City Council, reinforcing the notion of the CEH as a commonwealth of sovereign and economically interdependent nations.

Despite all the turbulences the European continent faced, the desire of the USSR to integrate into international and European political and economic structures had not yet completely failed. And to Bush's statements (in a meeting at Malta) that in relations between the USSR and the West, "Western liberal values" had finally triumphed, Gorbachev replied: but are democracy and market to be considered western liberal values? Pointing out that those values could be also compatible with systems other than capitalism. His reference was evidently to the socialism with a human face that he was trying to build in the USSR and to European social democracies.

Perhaps, more subtly, Bush intended to affirm that to the upcoming economic and ideological collapse of Soviet power, a European Community that was gaining new dynamism and economic weight was simultaneously consolidating. The US secretary of state, J. Baker, proposed a compromise: "we should speak of democratic values as the basis of a common platform".

Anyway, instead of the idea of convergence of the "comparative advantages" of socialism and capitalism, in the late 80s, a gradual acceptance of Western patterns and values had occurred in the

USSR, leading to the definitive erosion of the Soviet political and social system. Gorbachev eventually disregarded the principles of Leninism and socialism because they were now “useless”.

Gorbachev’s passionate dream of a CEH seemed to have been overcome by events in the heart of the continent and the political and economic degradation within the USSR, which became much more serious in 1990-1991, had substantially compromised the possibility of an effective Soviet foreign policy.

May 1990 turned out to be a milestone: the Soviet Union, “the engine of the new political thinking”, was on the verge of collapse, of a profound systemic crisis, due to the improvised and hazy nature of the reforms underway and especially with the unsatisfactory results of the socio-economic developments of 1985-88. The failure of the CMEA reform also contributed to the worsening of the situation. At the 44th session of the CMEA in Prague, held from 5 to 7 July 1988, an attempt was made to reach an agreement to create a true common market, which, over time, should have assumed such status as that of the European Economic Community. The idea received strong support from the Soviet Union, Hungary, and Poland, a somewhat tepid flow of approval from Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia, conditional approval from East Germany, and total disapproval from Romania. A similar split had taken place in discussions on the introduction of a convertible currency without which a common market would have had no chance of being realized.

So, since 1990, the Soviet leadership began to directly address the leaders of European Countries and the USA with a request to provide financial assistance to the USSR. This was preceded by a conference in San Francisco in April 1990, at which representatives of the major Western commercial banks had asserted that further lending to the Soviet Union, due to increased credit risks, was only possible with the participation of the governments of main Western countries, and no longer through transactions between private banks. These were, therefore, loans in exchange for political decisions that the USSR had to make. Simply put, these were essentially “political credits”.

In November 1990 the “Charter of Paris for a New Europe” was signed to actively invite the nations of the Eastern Bloc into the ideological framework of the West, taking advantage of German reunification and the fall of communist regimes in Europe.

On June 11, 1991, the joint Russian-American program “Consent for a Chance” was prepared. In it, it was proposed that the transition of the USSR to a liberal market economy should begin on January 1992 and be completed in 4 years. The program provided an annual loan inflow of foreign capital between 20 and 35 billion dollars. Gorbachev called the Western loan the new “Marshall Plan” of the USSR. On July 11, 1991, Gorbachev sent an important document with attachments via diplomatic couriers to Western partners. The document contained promises of price liberalization, large-scale privatizations, complete economic freedom, and the creation of market infrastructure (Gorbachev, *Zhizn i reformy*, 1995). Gorbachev was assured of the commitment of the IMF and the World Bank to help the country ferry the Soviet economy towards a fully free market. That document marked the definitive transition of the USSR to capitalism and its full integration into the world capitalist economy.

In December 1991, the USSR was no longer on the world’s political map. And since the destinies of the USSR and the CEH project were intertwined, “the collapse of one inevitably became the collapse of the other”. But the attempt at cooperation between the USSR and the EC was used to build future partnership relations between the EU and post-Soviet Russia.