

## **From disarmament to pan-European projects, Gorbachev in the perspective of European Left (1985-1992).**

Historiography has long debated Gorbachev's alleged conversion to social democratic ideals. While the notion of reformist communism seems to settle this debate in favour of placing Perestroika and New Thinking within a communist framework, the relationship between Soviet leadership and European socialists remains little investigated<sup>1</sup>. This paper aims to explore this relationship, both at the level of political cultures and at the level of the individual personalities involved. I argue that, despite an initial convergence on disarmament issues and the pivotal role played in the USSR-EC rapprochement since 1985, European socialists at first had no illusions about Gorbachev's openings. The Soviet side-lining of the international communist movement would lead in 1987-88, despite the persistence of deep ideological differences, to a further evolution of this relationship. Both the socialists and the communist reformers shared the same concern for the redefinition of East-West relations on a continental level. It is in this context that the interest shown by the socialists in the Gorbachevian "Common European Home" must be seen, as well as a series of proposals formulated, even after the dissolution of the USSR, by figures such as Mitterrand, Brandt and Delors. These, in fact, despite their different ideological matrix, retained points of contact with Gorbachev's vision. Finally, it is significant that the socialist world, almost to the eve of the dissolution of the USSR, did not abandon its support for Gorbachev and his reformist course, advocating the need to integrate the Soviet Union into the international financial system and to launch a massive aid programme.

One of the elements that characterised Gorbachev's first two years at the helm of the USSR was certainly a greater openness to dialogue with figures and parties in the socialist area, particularly on the issues of peace and disarmament. A tendency, this, that would take the form of a periodic and constructive confrontation of the General Secretary with some leading figures in the socialist world, as well as greater exchanges between the CPSU and the social democratic parties. One should not minimise the importance of these channels of meeting and confrontation and in particular of Gorbachev's exchanges with Brandt and González. These, in fact, with their frankness represented an important moment of confrontation, sometimes even critical, in stimulating Gorbachev's proposals on disarmament.

Moreover, it is not insignificant how, precisely based on a new dialogue between the USSR and European socialists, institutional relations between the USSR and the European

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<sup>1</sup> I will generally use "social democratic" and "socialist" as synonyms to identify parties of the non-communist Left that adhered to the Socialist International.

Parliament were inaugurated. From this point of view, the visit made in December 1985 by a delegation of the Socialist Group in the European Parliament would have been successful. Indeed, although it did not have the opportunity to meet the General Secretary, it recorded encouraging signs in the Soviet willingness to discuss in depth the issues on which there were major differences of opinion. It is significant to note that the Socialist Group looked very favourably on the deepening of this report. As Rudi Arndt, Group Chairman and delegation leader, said several times during the visit, the Socialist Group «saw it as one of its main duties to campaign for detente and disarmament. An improvement in economic relations and a friendlier structuring of political relations would make it easier to move towards disarmament»<sup>2</sup>.

Moreover, in the socialist sphere, there were no illusions at this stage about the nature of the Soviet openings. The socialists' objective, albeit with different nuances depending on the party, was disarmament and even those most willing to accept Moscow's openings did so within the framework of a conception of common security which, as stated in the SPD's *Draft for a new Manifesto* of June 1986, did not exclude a dialogue with the communist countries in the name of a common interest in peace. Significantly, Brandt, opening the IS Congress in Lima, stated:

«all serious proposals must be taken seriously, must be appreciated and analyzed even if they happen to originate in Moscow [...] Everybody knows about the fundamental differences between democratic socialism and authoritarian communism. Yet we also know of the overriding obligation towards preserving peace which takes priority over opposing ideologies»<sup>3</sup>.

Such a position did not, however, prevent the Congress itself from reiterating its condemnation of the Soviet presence in Afghanistan, the recurrent human rights violations and the treatment of Jewish citizens in the USSR.

Turning to the analysis of the period from 1987 to autumn 1989, a significant element that must be considered is the evolution, in the light of the acquisitions of the New Thinking, of the Soviet attitude towards the International Communist Movement. The importance in this sense of the round table that brought together communists and socialists in Moscow, as part of the celebrations of the seventieth anniversary of the October Revolution, shines through in the considerations of Italian communists as well as French socialists.

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<sup>2</sup> GPSE-657; «Report of the Visit by the Delegation of the Bureau of the Socialist Group in the European Parliament to Moscow and Leningrad, 16-23 December 1985», 24 January 1986, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Fondation Jean Jaurès, Archives Socialistes, Internationale socialiste; 60RI(WB)97; «Opening Address by Willy Brandt», 20 June 1986, p. 8.

While the Soviet reforms and the new Gorbachevian openings certainly met with the interest of the socialist world, the analyses and approaches outlined by its various souls were very varied.

The measure of Brandt's perception, who met Gorbachev again in April 1988, can be seen in the speech with which, a month later, he opened the work of the IS Council meeting in Madrid. On this occasion, unlike a year earlier in Rome, he noted the transparency and innovative and positive nature of Moscow's positions and launched into a harsh criticism of the still suspicious attitude of the USA. The aim was to start a new chapter in European history in which military confrontation would be replaced by economic collaboration and peaceful competition. This of course without questioning the various systems and differences between socialists and communists<sup>4</sup>.

If we then look at the whole of the speeches that characterised the debate that took place on the IS Council in Madrid, we can see how the socialist world shared an awareness of the importance of the reforms taking place in the USSR. On how to relate to this situation and the new possibilities that were opening at the level of inter-European dialogue, positions were more varied. Overall, however, it is significant that the Disarmament Resolution produced in Madrid spoke of a new impetus towards a second "Ostpolitik". The text went on to emphasise the "special responsibility" that the IS believed it had in fostering a new openness towards the USSR and its allies, «considering that peaceful relations are not contradicted by internal reform and progress in those parts of Europe whose people are our neighbours»<sup>5</sup>.

The range of socialist views on Gorbachev's proposal for a "Common European Home" remained rather heterogeneous. Indeed, on the one hand it met with sympathy from the SPD and one can see an interesting development in the use of the formula in the documentation of the Socialist Group in the European Parliament. On the other hand, if in Mauroy's reading it remained nothing more than a nice formula, for Craxi it was Moscow's response to his own fears about developments in the European integration process<sup>6</sup>.

This already complicated picture ended up being further enriched from the beginning of 1989. The 18th IS Congress, held in Stockholm in June, in fact made explicit a marked tendency, already present in some documents produced in the spring, on the socialist side to read the changes taking place in the USSR as the triumph of social democracy over

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<sup>4</sup> 60RI(WB)110; «Speech by Willy Brandt», 11 May 1988.

<sup>5</sup> 60RI(WB)110; «Resolution on Disarmament», 11-12 May 1988, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Patrimonio dell'Archivio Storico del Senato della Repubblica, fondi federati/Fondazione Craxi. Sezione 1, Serie 9, Sottoserie 1, Discorso 12. «4° Convegno dei partiti socialisti europei degli stati aderenti all'Alleanza atlantica, Roma (18 novembre 1988)».

communism. Among the most explicit interventions was Mauroy's: in his view, it no longer made sense to ask whether Gorbachev represented a collective aspiration or a personal idea. He had abandoned communist ideas for a set of values that were basically social democratic ones. Finally, the French leader wondered whether reformed communism could still be called communism and what conditions would definitively lead it to become socialism of freedom<sup>7</sup>.

Within this conceptual framework, socialist support for Gorbachev, as well as for the development of forms of political dialogue between the two Europes, was nevertheless reaffirmed and seemed stronger and more generally shared than ever. Moreover, the Congress also saw the participation, as observers, of delegations from the CPSU and PCI. Indicative of the socialist position was finally the congress resolution on developments in the communist world. It reaffirmed strong support for the Soviet leader, even if this was to be part of a broader campaign to support progress towards democracy and the restoration of those socialist ideals that had long been repressed in the East<sup>8</sup>. If, therefore, a tension was created at the level of political cultures, from the point of view of support, even at the level of dialogue between the two Europes, the European socialist world proposed itself as Gorbachev's main interlocutor. It is only in this overall context that one can understand how the "Common European Home" became an identity trait in the political proposal of the European Left in 1989.

Finally, the last phase would be characterised by the emergence of differences and different priorities that the socialists, again within a pan-European framework, would follow up by developing new projects. It is important to reflect on the distinctive features of the socialist response to the challenge posed by the events unfolding in Eastern Europe in the autumn-winter of 1989. As is clear from a series of IS meetings, the overriding objective was to foster the development of multi-party democratic systems and the end of planned economies, which, however, were not to give way to a model entirely deprived of the role of the state and governed by the market<sup>9</sup>. For this it was essential to solve the economic problems of the countries in transition to democracy and to develop relations with the social democratic parties that were emerging or returning from exile<sup>10</sup>. With regard to this last element, in his speech to the Geneva Council, Mauroy questioned how to deal with the interest shown in IS by forces linked to reforming communism. He resolved the question by distinguishing between two levels: the first, specifically of IS, open only to social democratic parties, and the second, within the

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<sup>7</sup> 60RI(WB)121; «Project de Discours de Pierre Mauroy devant le Congrès de l'Internationale Socialiste-Stockholm 20 juin 1989», pp. 3-6.

<sup>8</sup> 60RI(WB)126; «Congress Resolution. Developments in the Communist World».

<sup>9</sup> 60RI(WB)118; «Report of meeting of European Socialist International Leaders in Milan», pp. 1-2.

<sup>10</sup> 60RI(WB)129; «Position Paper on Eastern Europe: Problems and Opportunities».

framework of the EuroLeft, capable of bringing together socialists and reformist communists by fostering discussion on the political and economic conditions of the rapprochement between the two Europe<sup>11</sup>. On the same occasion, Craxi's different opinion on the subject was also noted. He, in fact, regarded western assistance from an economic point of view as secondary to the reforms that were to characterise the eastern European countries and called for a political dialogue with all possible partners, including the reformist communists. In this regard, albeit with some reservations, he recognised the effort towards change made by the PCI<sup>12</sup>. These reflections help to understand how the socialists did not consider it contradictory to develop relations both with the social democrats of the three Baltic republics, whose demand for independence they supported, and with the CPSU with whom they continued dialogue and exchanges. The last element of the social-democratic vision, evoked by figures such as Vogel, González and De Michelis was finally a strengthening of the European integration process, both from an EMU and political perspective<sup>13</sup>.

All these elements formed the basis of the project, presented by Mitterrand at the end of 1989, of a "European Confederation". It is therefore not surprising that it found considerable success in the socialist world, starting with leaders such as Mauroy and Craxi who supported it at the meeting of the Union of Socialist Parties of the European Community in Berlin in February 1990. Emphasising how the European Community was to be the basis on which a Greater Europe was to be built, the Socialist Group in the European Parliament, in May, at a seminar held in Bruges on the future of Europe, also endorsed Mitterrand and Delors' vision of concentric circles<sup>14</sup>.

In September 1992, the 19th IS Congress met in Berlin. It sanctioned the admission among its members of the new PDS that had risen from the ashes of the PCI and could count Gorbachev among its guests. In the texts of the adopted resolutions, the idea of a new post-Cold War era emerged, which, not without opportunity, was characterised by new instability and insecurity following the collapse of communism. The IS therefore launched its call for the development of «a defensive pan-European security system to guarantee security and stability for European nations on the basis of common principles»<sup>15</sup>. Despite the different ideological

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<sup>11</sup> 60RI(WB)129; «Speech by Pierre Mauroy», pp. 3-5.

<sup>12</sup> 60RI(WB)129; «Minutes of the meeting of the Council of the Socialist International», 23-24 November 1989, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> 1fp2\_418; «Object: réunion des leaders socialistes européens. Milan 2-3 novembre 1989», p. 3; 60RI(WB)118; «Report of meeting of European Socialist International Leaders in Milan», p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> GPSE-661; «Bureau. Seminar in Bruges. 7 and 8 May 1990», pp. 4-5.

<sup>15</sup> GPSE-0709; «The Congress Resolution», p. 30.

basis, this type of proposal, like the Mitterrandian project, maintained points of dialogue with the “Common European Home”. Indeed, with it they shared the prospect of a large pan-European structure, including the USSR, to be founded from the CSCE. Moreover, despite all the differences and developments analysed, the socialist world supported Gorbachev and his reformist course to the end. In this sense, what stands out is that certain co-responsibility for the fate of Perestroika and the USSR to which, in May 1990, Brandt referred before the IS Council meeting in Cairo<sup>16</sup>. It would manifest itself, for example, in the discussions of the Socialist Group in the European Parliament on how to structure effective economic aid to the USSR and how to facilitate the Soviet request for entry into the IMF and the World Bank, which would last throughout 1991. If then, after the August coup, an IS delegation led by Mauroy visited Moscow, as evidence of how the socialist world did not stop pleading the cause of the USSR practically until the eve of its dissolution, one can cite a resolution produced in November by the IS Council held in Santiago. Here it outlined a Europe seen as an economic area including Moscow and to be understood as a basis on which to develop a “common European home” that would allow the citizens of the former USSR to build their hopes on solid foundations<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> 60RI(WB)131; «Opinion Remarks by Willy Brandt», p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> «Developments in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union», in *Socialist affairs and Women & politics*, n. 4 (1991): 37.