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PERESTROIKA AND CHANGED REPORTING OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN NEWSPAPERS

Jukka Pietiläinen

INTRODUCTION

The Soviet newspapers did not write about many negative or disruptive issues in their own society and therefore created a picture of a society that was tranquil, and stable: change tended to be controlled and manageable and social problems were seldom if ever beyond solution. Uncertainty, despair and doubt were not characteristic of the political leadership, nor of the official national mood. According to Hopkins, this created a credibility gap: often what was written in the press did not correspond to the reality as the audience understood it. The role of the mass media became dysfunctional when it so overwhelmingly concentrated on portraying success, progress and accomplishment, thereby ignoring the evidence to the contrary[1].

There was also a great discrepancy between the perceived social problems and the media coverage. It was, for example, found out that although the local newspaper *Taganrogskaya Pravda* reported widely on the economic-development plan of the city of Taganrog adopted by the City Council and the City Committee of the Party, only a small proportion of the citizens (10-13 per cent) knew its contents. The low level of received information was explained by the lack of interest among the population and the varying interests of the public and the media. The newspapers paid little attention to issues that were perceived as the most important problems (e.g., housing)[2].

1 Mark W. Hopkins, *Mass Media in the Soviet Union*. New York: Pegasus 1970, 179-80.

2 *Massovaya informatsiya v sovetskom promyshlennom gorode*. Moskva: Politizdat 1980, 363-5.

Daniel Tarschys found out that between the 1950s and the 1970s the Soviet definition of problems was modernised: the number of coordination problems increased, problems related to the infrastructure and environment became more prominent, criticism has been moved to a more general level, individual scapegoats were blamed less, and the tone of criticism became more constructive[3]. On the other hand, Mikko Lagerspetz argued that in the late Soviet period there was 'a tendency to present the problems as being caused by individual factors or by the inability of the officials responsible.'[4] Social problems as presented in the socialist, state-controlled media were 'parts of the official discourse' which was 'covertly opposed by the unofficial discourse of the civil society'. According to his view, the conflict between common sense and the official discourse of the rulers caused the collapse of the system[5]. The role of media is, however, not among the main theories or explanations on reasons for collapse of communist power, even if the role of the media can be seen as a part of legitimation crisis theory, which has also many other aspects[6].

However, the role of glasnost and changes in official media are only seldom paid attention in discussion on the reasons for the collapse of the Soviet system[7]. One aspect that has remained largely unnoticed in the literature on the perestroika and glasnost era is the changed framing of social problems in the Soviet media.

The aim of this article is to draw attention to this process of change between 1985 and 1991 and to how it contributed to the peaceful collapse of the Soviet system. The study is based on an analysis of the regional press in Karelia[8], complemented with a similar analysis of

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3 Daniel Tarschys, *The Soviet Political Agenda. Problems and Priorities, 1950-1970*. London & Basingstoke: Macmillan 1979, 170-3.

4 Mikko Lagerspetz, *Constructing Post-Communism. A Study in the Estonian Social Problems Discourse.* Turku: Turun yliopisto 1996, 98.

5 Ibid. 137-8.

6 Leslie Holmes, *Post-Communism. An Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press 1997, 42-58.

7 See Stephen F. Cohen, 'Was the Soviet System Reformable?', *Slavic Review* 63 (2004), 459-88; Michael Cox (ed.), *Rethinking the Soviet Collapse. Sovietology, the Death of Communism and the New Russia*. London & New York: Pinter 1998.

8 Jukka Pietiläinen, *The Regional Newspaper in Post-Soviet Russia. Society, Press and Journalism in the Republic of Karelia 1985-2001*. Tampere: Tampere University Press 2002.

the national newspapers *Pravda* and *Izvestiya*. *Pravda*, as the CPSU organ, and *Izvestiya*, as paper of the Soviet government, were the most important newspapers on the national level. The role of television was certainly even more important[9], but for practical reasons the research on newspapers is the only available alternative to assess the media content in the past.

The newspaper sample thus comprised two national newspapers, *Pravda* and *Izvestiya*, and the most important regional newspaper *Leninskaya Pravda* (later *Severnyi Kurier*) in Republic of Karelia, as one of peripheries of the Soviet Union. Stories related to social problems were selected for the analysis. The focus is on social problems as reported in the pages of the newspapers. The aim is not to compare these materials with the reality, or to discuss the real nature of the social problems in the Soviet Union, it is rather to analyse the elements of the reality that were defined as problems in the press at that time.

The material analysed in this article is based on newspapers published during two sample weeks, the second week of April and the second week of September, in 1985, 1987, 1989 and 1991. Every second year was chosen in order to highlight the differences that occurred between these years.

THE GLASNOST ERA

The policy of perestroika and its application to the media field, glasnost, started in 1985, when Mikhail Gorbachev was elected Secretary General of the CPSU. At first glasnost was not a goal in its own right, but a tool of democratisation and political reform. When Gorbachev first referred to the concept at the 27th Congress of the CPSU in March 1986, it could hardly be called a policy[10]. It was seen as an aid to economic 'acceleration,' and appeared to be no more than another example of the

[9] Reino Paasilinna, *Glasnost and Soviet Television. A Study of the Soviet mass media and its role in society from 1985-1991*. Helsinki: Finnish Broadcasting Company 1995.

[10] E. E. Vyazemsky & N. V. Eliseeva, *SSSR – Rossiya. Ot M.S. Gorbacheva do V.V. Putina 1985-2002*. Moskva: Stupeni 2003, 43.

'criticism and self-criticism' of the regular campaigns. There had even been glasnost campaigns in the 1970s[11].

Glasnost initially meant the media's participation in the campaign to highlight corrupt bureaucratic practices, but from 1986 onwards protecting the population from disturbing news was considered a bad old habit and the openness of public channels of communication increased to an unprecedented degree[12].

On the one hand, glasnost was intended to establish 'a political culture of debate and difference, rather than uniformity and regimentation'[13], but on the other hand it was a tool for promoting official policies; for example, 'when the Central Committee cancelled the projected diversion of the Ob River in Siberia to the Central Asian republics, there was a rush of media coverage of water pollution'[14]. Although the first Western assessments were rather suspicious, 'glasnost will mean exactly what the leadership wants it to mean: no more and no less'[15], the liberation proved to be a process that could no longer be reversed.

During the glasnost period newspaper circulation rose from 185 million in 1984 to 230 million in 1989. The circulations of reformist and liberal newspapers such as *Izvestiya* and *Komsomolskaya Pravda* rose, while conservative papers such as *Pravda* and *Sovetskaya Rossiya* stagnated[16].

Glasnost did not eliminate the standard mass-media control mechanisms, but it made their usage more selective, while editors

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11 Brian McNair, *Glasnost, Perestroika and the Soviet Media*. London & New York: Routledge 1991, 42

12 Andrle Vladimir, *A Social History of Twentieth-Century Russia*. London: Edward Arnold 1994, 271.

13 Brian McNair, 'Reform and restructuring in the Soviet media. Before and after the August 1991 coup', in John Eldridge (ed.), *Getting the Message*. London: Routledge 1993, 57

14 John D.H. Downing, *Internationalizing Media Theory. Transition, Power, Culture. Reflections on Media in Russia, Poland and Hungary 1980-95.* London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage 1996, 80.

15 Mary Dejevsky, 'Glasnost and the Soviet Press', in Julian Graffy & Geoffrey A. Hosking (eds), *Culture and the Media in the USSR Today*. Houndmills & London: Macmillan 1989, 39.

16 Joseph Gibbs, *Gorbachev's Glasnost. The Soviet Media in the First Phase of Perestroika*. College Station (Tex.): Texas A & M University Press 1999, 86.

gradually secured more discretion over content[17]. The leadership considered liberal journalists its allies, and a large section of the media responded by supporting it[18]. The changes in the multilingual weekly *Moscow News* during the glasnost era included a new predominance of substantive, hard subjects over softer ones, a predilection for unpleasant subjects and negative commentary, a growing passion for pluralism, and a new emphasis on timely and controversial topics[19]. Mickiewicz describes timeliness (*operativnost*) as a new value in Soviet journalism and compares its impact with that of glasnost itself[20].

The number of letters sent by readers to the newspapers increased dramatically. 'In 1986-87 almost every national newspaper and weekly magazine published letters to the editor containing views in direct and irreconcilable confrontation with one another'[21]. Many papers started to print letters on the front page.

Glasnost brought problems and popular dissatisfaction to light: they were related to services, ecology, ethnic issues and the rise in prices. Soviet public opinion was more volatile and flexible than ever, which also led to the polarisation of views -- a new phenomenon in Soviet society[22]. The media started to reflect the opinions of the politically active segments of the population and public opinion became more influential[23].

Different periodisations of glasnost have been proposed. Vyazemsky and Eliseeva[24] refer to the years 1986 and 1987 as the first phase, and the years 1988-1991 as the second. Socialist values were preserved during the former, while during the second phase discussion about the

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17 Ibid., 88.

18 Vera Tolz, 'The Role of Journalists and the Media in Changing Soviet Society', in David Lane (ed.), *Russia in Flux*. Aldershot: Edward Elgar 1992, 112.

19 Elisabeth Schillinger & Catherine Porter, 'Glasnost and the Transformation of Moscow News', *Journal of Communication* 41 (1991), 144.

20 Ellen Mickiewicz, *Split Signals. Television and Politics in the Soviet Union*. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press 1988, 56

21 Vladimir Shlapentokh, 'Public opinion in Gorbachev's USSR: consensus and polarisation', *Media, Culture and Society* 12 (1990), 154.

22 Ibid.

23 Vera Tolz, 'The New Role of the Media and Public Opinion under Mikhail Gorbachev', *The Journal of Communist Studies* 9 (1993), 198-199.

24 Vyazemsky & Eliseeva, *SSSR – Rossiya*, 53.

historical past was replaced with open condemnation of the socialist system. Gibbs[25] proposes a similar periodisation, while McNair[26] distinguishes a 'top down' phase up to 1990 and a 'bottom up' phase from 1990 to 1991. The concept of 'socialist pluralism' was replaced by 'liberal pluralism' in the second stage and criticism started to arise from below with increasing spontaneity. If glasnost is understood as part of Soviet politics, its end could be seen at the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991.

Some scholars have focused on the changed framing of social problems in the media. Afanasyev and Gilinskij analysed articles on alcohol, drugs and crime in the St. Petersburg press and found that in 1989 (in comparison to 1986) the amount of problem-focused coverage had increased and that there was more emphasis on macro-social considerations in articles related to alcohol, drugs and crime and less on individual considerations. The emphasis in the proposed solutions had 'shifted onto various measures of economic, social, legal, organizational, and cultural nature'[27]. Lagerspetz pointed out that there was a slight tendency in 1986-1987 to blame the institutional level for problems, and after 1988 the economic and political system and dependence on the Soviet central power came 'to be viewed as the single most important reason for a number of problems'[28]. Boyko[29] noted that in 1990, in comparison with 1993 and 1996, newspapers very seldom mentioned the reasons for the problems (in 75 per cent of the relevant articles no reason was mentioned).

SOVIET SOCIAL PROBLEMS TO BE SOLVED (1985)

One of the tasks of the Soviet press was to assist in solving social problems and therefore articles about these problems and their solutions featured

25 Gibbs, *Gorbachev's Glasnost*, 89-90.

26 Brian McNair, 'Media in Post-Soviet Russia: An Overview', *European Journal of Communication* 9 (1994), 116-22.

27 Vyacheslav Afanasev & Yakov Gilinskii, 'Alcohol, drugs and crime in the St. Peterburg press', in M. Lagerspetz (ed.), *Social Problems in Newspapers*. Helsinki: NAD 1994, 66.

28 Mikko Lagerspetz, *Constructing Post-Communism*, 98.

29 O. V. Boyko, 'Reprezentatsiya sotsialnykh problem v rossiiskoi presse 90-kh godov', *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniya* 2002:8, 122.

heavily in the newspapers. This applied especially to *Leninskaya Pravda*, since almost every issue had an article with the strapline ‘Critical signal’. There were also other stories about social problems, some of which were based on readers’ letters and carried a strapline such as ‘Waiting for a reply’ or ‘On the basis of a reader’s letter’.

Letters to the editor were one of the channels through which a Soviet citizen could bring everyday problems into the public discussion. As a rule, those who were criticised were expected to reply within one month. Although this was not fully complied with, the paper published stories that had been prepared in response to the complaints.

According to the texts, little journalistic effort was put into obtaining information or uncovering social problems. The problems became public only when someone brought them to light in the newspaper either by sending a letter or otherwise contacting the newsroom.

The national newspapers published in Moscow were better placed to take a critical stand mainly because they could draw attention to the actions of those on the lower levels of the administration. This made *Pravda* and *Izvestiya* influential on the regional and the local level, too. If a problem attracted attention in the national newspaper more effort would be devoted to its solution. National newspapers were important agents of the state (even if their actions were certainly also limited and regulated).

When a social problem was taken up in a Soviet newspaper, it was usually a low-level one, e.g., in an enterprise or workplace. The treatment was usually formal: a problem was identified, often a relevant party document was mentioned, and a solution was expected to be found if this party decision were to be implemented. The reason for the problem was defined as a shortcoming in the implementation of party policy, or poor management on the lower levels. Usually the names of those responsible were mentioned.

Unlike the regional newspapers, *Pravda* and *Izvestiya* published more stories reporting what had happened after the critical comments had been published in the press. They also published responses to complaints made in letters to the editor (even if unpublished) or in the newspaper articles themselves, and reported what had been done in order to correct the shortcomings. These stories often carried the headline ‘Measures have been taken’. They told of problems in transport and consumer

services, for example, and reported that the persons in change had been punished, warned or dismissed[30].

These problems concerned everyday issues that harmed individuals but which could be discussed and solved without challenging the system. In this case, the newspaper compensated for the lack of an official complaints procedure.

There were many more 'Measures have been taken' stories in the national press than in the regional newspapers, and they appeared under other headlines, too: 'After publication in "*Pravda*"' or 'After criticism'. The national newspapers also organised special assignments, or 'swoops' (in Russian '*reid*'), in order to investigate alleged malpractice, grievances and similar problems in the regions.

A typical story highlights the functions of such critical articles in the Soviet Union:

After publication in 'Pravda'

'Why the guests are coming'

An article with this headline appeared in 'Pravda' on June 6 concerning shortcomings in the organisation of a socialist competition between working collectives in cities of the Ural region.

As the secretary of the Perm city committee of the CPSU V. Surkin reported to the editorial office, the article was discussed in a general meeting of the directors of the industrial transport departments, vice presidents of the city executive committees, and representatives of city planning committees of Sverdlovsk, Perm and Chelyabinsk. Recommendations were made to draw up regulations concerning the results of competitions between cities and the regular exchange of experiences. Agreements have been made concerning competitions between working collectives.

In addition, the reply states among problems related to the organisation of socialist competitions between cities in different regions that

[30] For examples see Pietiläinen, *The Regional Newspaper in Post-Soviet Russia*, 411-3.

> recommendations should provided by the CTUC [Central Trade Union Council]. At the moment they do not exist. Experiences of similar competitions gained in other regions should be better generalised, which would help to eliminate the errors mentioned in the article.
>
> Unfortunately, so far the CTUC has not given any response to the story published in the newspaper. [31]

In this kind of story the active role of the paper in solving the problems is evident. It gives advice on what should be done and assists in finding a solution, although the results are seldom perfect. In the above case, for example, the trade union organisation had not given any response. Moreover, the period between the original article and the follow-up was very long, although this was an extreme example), which indicated the slow functioning of the Soviet system.

The stories concerning problems followed a standard structure. The problem was defined, a party decision was presented and those responsible were urged to implement the party decisions. Perhaps the true significance of the CPSU decisions was to give individuals and organisations on different levels tools to enable them to plead for their causes.

It is impossible to know whether the public attention to the problems led to any improvements. It is likely that at least the problem mentioned was given special treatment, and that action against those responsible was taken.

Social problems were presented as affairs that affected ‘us all’. Journalism was a participant in solving them and it looked for explanations and encouraged better performance. A typical problem story began with a description of the situation and the problem, then the responsible person was asked the reason for the shortcomings and finally the story referred to a party decision urging the resolution of the problem or the taking of some action. Poor discipline and irresponsibility were mentioned as the main reasons.

The cause of the problems was not investigated on the structural level, and the guilty parties were always individuals or groups who

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[31] *Pravda*, 14 Sep. 1985.

were usually named: the bus depot did not provide enough buses or the construction unit did not repair a sports hall. If only the party decisions had been implemented, and if everybody had worked in a responsible way, there would not have been any problems. This kind of 'individualisation' did not encourage the search for solutions on the structural level. Thus the social system was saved from criticism but the structural-level problems and demoralisation may have worsened as a result: those responsible knew the real problems in implementing party policy, although they could not speak out in public.

SOVIET PROBLEMS WITH A GLASNOST FLAVOUR (1987)

By 1987 Gorbachev had been in power for two years and his new policies had started to produce results. This was the period of glasnost; the limits of public discussion became wider and the debate on socialist pluralism had begun. The first violent ethnic clashes occurred in Alma-Ata, Kazakhstan, in December 1986, and 1987 was the turning point in the development of inter-ethnic relations. The Baltic republics had an important role in this, although they did not experience the violent clashes. The economic development was still positive; unemployment remained minimal and inflation low. The anti-alcohol campaign, started in 1985, was still going on and it had caused a drop in tax revenue.

The Central Committee meeting in January 1987 set the third phase of perestroika in motion, extending its influence from economic issues and public discussion to political issues, the status of the Party and democratisation. At this stage Gorbachev understood democratisation as the shifting of power from the executive to the decision-making organs, and from the centre to the regions. Socialism and the existing political system were not yet being questioned.[32]

The framing of social problems remained close to the Soviet style, the only difference being that the scope might have become wider: some subjects that had been forbidden were now allowed on the pages of the newspapers.

[32] Jyrki Iivonen, *Neuvostovallan viimeiset vuodet*. Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 1992, 12-3.

There were some signs of problems that were not so easily solved. *Izvestiya* reported, for example, on the bread factory in Kaluga, that stored grain in the open air where pigeons could easily get at it. Despite the decisions made, the situation remained the same. The story ended:

> The reply signed by the chief of administration of 'Kalugastroi' is laconic: we cannot act because the object is not included in the Plan of Construction Work.
>
> To whom does all this give pleasure? For nobody except, perhaps, the pigeons, it's an easy life for them.[33]

The structural reasons (why the work was not included in the plan) were not discussed here either, but it came closer than in the examples from 1985.

The letters to the editor covered issues such as the lack of good books (while books that no one wanted were available in large numbers), bureaucracy, shortcoming in the availability of consumer goods, and problems caused by the transition to self-financing in some enterprises. One of the articles about replies to complaints pointed out that the Ministry of Light Industry had reacted to one letter from a local newspaper by making a complaint against the paper. *Pravda* published the story, expressed surprise and defended honesty and openness in public affairs, especially in cases in which the newspaper was involved[34].

The local newspapers in Karelia were covering a wider variety of problems more extensively. For example, even stealing was mentioned: One story was about the stealing of vodka. It began with the reporter's introduction:

> All the people know that stealing is shameful. Try to find a person who would support the opposite view. But it is sin to be hidden, that we have different attitudes to stealing. Let's say, to steal from one's neighbour, it is a shame, but to steal from the state – also not good, but

[33] *Izvestiya*, 12 Sep. 1987.

[34] *Pravda* 11 Sep. 1987.

possible. ‘The state has everything, it will not be in want’ – concludes another one.[35]

The view that stealing from the state, even if illegal, was generally acceptable in popular opinion would perhaps not have been given in Soviet newspapers a few years earlier. Now it was used to emphasise that this attitude was misguided and the practice should be abolished, if for no other reason than the inevitable punishment that followed, as the article mentioned.

The number of letters to the editor increased, but their contribution was still small. *Leninskaya Pravda* published a whole page of letters on April 10 under the headline ‘The reader proposes, discusses, debates’. The letters themselves were about problems in the forestry sector, the ticket-control service of the local bus company and the lack of products in the shops of Petrozavodsk, and supported the anti-drinking campaign. They all commented on previous articles in the newspaper, mainly supporting the ideas presented in them but also criticising them, correcting mistakes and moving the discussion forward. The paper defended the publishing of letters in this way:

> ‘Full clarity on all the vitally important questions is needed’ as was underlined in the January (1987) Plenary of the CC of the CPSU.
>
> One of the ways to achieve this clarity is the exchange of opinions in the pages of the newspaper. It is no accident that we call the newspaper the tribune of the people.
>
> Glasnost, openness, implies not only one’s own ability and the will of our fellow man to speak out, but also the capability to listen to other opinions, not to be afraid of them, and this means not interrupting the opponent. This was said recently in the Congress of the Union of Journalists of the USSR.[36]

The paper referred to the discussion as ‘a good lesson in democracy’, and considered its aim to be to ‘resolve together the problems that arise in our life’.

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35 *Leninskaya Pravda (LP)*, 9 Apr. 1987.

36 *LP*, 10 Apr. 1987.

Many articles mentioned the search for new solutions. There were unresolved problems, and new solutions were in the air. Perestroika and other reforms were key issues, and great faith was placed in the reforms. For example, the stories mentioning the Baltic republics emphasised internationalism and the need to learn from the experiences of others.

THE PERESTROIKA ERA AND PROBLEMS THAT CANNOT BE SOLVED (1989)

By 1989 the policies of perestroika and glasnost had been in place for four years, and more signs of change were visible. The economic situation had become more problematic. The difference in prices between the free market and the state shops had increased, the shortage of daily household goods had become more acute and the Communist party had given up its leading role in formulating economic policy in 1988. Ethnic relations had become more conflict-ridden. There was an acute conflict involving human casualties in Azerbaijan in 1988, and in 1989 conflicts broke out in Georgia, Moldova, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. Popular fronts had become active in the Baltic republics.[37]

The reform of the political system was underway and the first elections for the Supreme Council of the USSR with a plurality of candidates were held in March 1989. The surprising result was the failure of the incumbents to be re-elected and the rejection of all candidates in some constituencies, and new elections were held in May.

Newspaper circulation peaked in 1989 and public debate was at its liveliest. The newspapers were much the same as in the Soviet era, but there was more discussion. Nevertheless, journalism functioned within the limits of the Soviet doctrine, which was interpreted more liberally, however. The social problems reported in the newspapers in 1989 were different from those covered in 1985 and 1987. In many problem stories, the writer himself was a participant, e.g., a director of a dairy factory who explained why there was not enough milk, or a citizen

[37] Iivonen, *Neuvostovallan viimeiset vuodet*.

who was affected by the problem. This was not new, but in 1989 the solutions were not as obvious.

The responsibility often lay not with a private person who had neglected his or her duty, but with the social structures, which no one seemed able to influence and which were not easy to change. The journalists themselves also wrote about problems, and took the side of the readers (citizens, consumers) against the authorities. The following is an example of a problem story by a journalist:

Will we solve the 'sweet' problem?

How long will we still have to go like mad rushing around in the city so that we can buy sugar with rationing cards?! The readers ask.

They no longer think about the beauty of the style – it has become painful! Here is one of the dozens of letters and phone calls: 'I read a short story, 'In the Ministry of Commerce of the KASSR' in the paper on 2 September and I got angry. There are rationing cards, but where to exchange them for goods? I run like an animal around the city looking for sugar. Why are these cards necessary?' (S. Luzgin, Petrozavodsk)

Indeed, why?

– We fulfil 100 per cent of the orders of the 'Prodtovarov' company for sugar delivery to the shops. Another issue is that the sugar we bring to the shops of Petrozavodsk, and to the other towns and districts of the republic, at the rate of one day's supply only, because the sugar 'goes from the wheels' [it is sold directly off the truck], there is not enough of it in the whole country. If we would give, let's say to Petrozavodsk, on a certain day over 20 tons, it would be taken away from the share owed to other citizens of Karelia, answered the director of 'Rosoptprodtorg' A. Sidorenko.

The 'sweet' problem of the inhabitants of Karelia cannot be solved if we ourselves do not start to grow sugar beets in the fields of the sovkhozes. But what can be done already now, to facilitate improving the difficult situation that has arisen?

– We have thought about this already; last Friday, 2 September, the representatives of the companies 'Prodtovarov' and 'Rosoptprodtorg' held a joint meeting in the Executive Committee in which it was agreed that the sugar delivery schedule would be placed in every store. At least the people will not need to run to the empty stores, said the

vice-director of the Executive Committee of the Petrozavodsk City Administration, V. Tikhomirov.

A reasonable decision on the sugar shortage that has occurred has been made in the Commercial Department of the Executive Committee; it is true, isn't it? Only the information about the delivery schedule has been as before lacking in our stores.

What is the matter? This question I addressed to S. Baklagina, the director of the company 'Prodtovarov'.

– The stores of 'Rosoptprodtorg' really receive the daily quota but – with a delay of one day. Until we have a guarantee that the delivery schedule will be strictly observed, we will not hang up any kind of information in the stores, told Svetlana Adolfovna.

So, the decision has been made, but it has not been implemented. It means that not only sugar and information but also the efficiency of the responsible workers here is in its previous state – there is a shortage of it.

Whose purposes does this serve?

O. Mimmieva[38]

As in Soviet times, the reason for the problem was the lack of discipline, but the old solution, the punishment of the guilty and an improvement in their discipline, was no longer offered. The problem remained in the air, without a solution. In fact, the real reason for the lack of sugar, Gorbachev's anti-alcohol policy, was not and could not be mentioned, as journalism was not yet able to challenge party policies. Various answers were given, but they did not point in any one direction. The journalist was looking for information and asking questions, but she no longer referred to party decisions.

While the individualisation of guilt distracted attention from structural solutions in 1985, no solution whatsoever was found in 1989. While Soviet journalism was disruptive on the structural level in 1985, in 1989 it was openly demoralising: everything was as before, there were no goods and no discipline.

[38] *LP*, 10 Sep. 1989.

Other problem stories were related to problems with the quality of construction, the lack of railway transportation services, failures in the postal service and a lack of petrol. On the national level, the shortage of goods had become a common topic in letters to the editor and in other articles. Various development plans were published in the press, on social development in rural areas and agricultural reform, for example.

Co-operatives were a new phenomenon, and the first signs of a market economy appeared in the Soviet system. On the other hand, individual business activities, such as engaging in commercial relations with foreign tourists were still criticised and police action against them praised, but such action did not produce major results. The amount of foreign currency changed through official channels was dropping, while the number of tourists kept increasing. Why are hotel personnel not acting against business with foreign tourists, the Leningrad correspondent F. Ivanov asked, and concluded: 'I think it is not worth looking for a reason. For too many people this kind of thriftlessness is profitable'[39].

A story published in *Pravda* on 13 September 1989 with the strapline 'Critical signal' concerned problems with the harvesting of vegetables in the Rostov region in Southern Russia. The record harvest of tomatoes was left to rot in the fields because nobody came to take them to the shops and markets. Products in the market were of poor quality, but the marketing organisations were not concerned. The regional party committee had agreed on a course of action, but nothing was done. At the end of the story the journalist wondered whether it was bad management all over again.

Society, as described in the newspapers, started to fall apart and solutions were no longer suggested. In any case, traditional solutions were no longer effective, and problems remained unresolved, even in the media reality.

[39] *Izvestiya*, 12 April 1989.

CRITICAL SIGNS ACCUMULATE (1991)

The year 1991 was the last year of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the system was clearly in evidence. Alternative media appeared, but the traditional Soviet media were still the backbone of the media system. Various declarations of sovereignty were made in various parts of the Soviet Union (even in Karelia in August 1990). Trade unions, ethnic movements and newly established political party units were the most active forms of voluntary association during 1991. The old regime still managed to maintain its position, however, and 'in the case of the Karelian Republic it is evident that Soviet power structures did not collapse because of broad mass mobilization and contentious collective action'[40].

Newspapers were not yet facing economic problems and this period has been described as the 'golden era of Soviet journalism', when the previous controlling apparatus had collapsed and the new one in the form of market control had not yet taken shape.

Social problems increased in the early 1990s. A single issue of *Pravda* or *Izvestiya* might report on several armed conflicts in various parts of the Soviet Union: Georgia, Chechen-Ingushetia, Tajikistan, Nagorno-Karabakh, Southern Ossetia, and more. Various declarations of sovereignty, strikes, and economic conflicts were everyday issues. The discussion on economic reforms was more prevalent, and the coverage was not exclusively positive.

Strikes had found their way onto the pages of the newspapers: *Leninskaya Pravda* reported that 'today the leasing limited company Petrozavodsk car depot (*avtokolonna*) 1123 will hold a one-day token strike' because this kind of company was prevented by law from using its funds in order to resolve social issues and increase salaries[41]. There were also signs of civil activity: Muscovites collected financial support for striking miners who had organised independent trade unions.[42]

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40 Ilkka Liikanen, 'Civil Society and Politics in Late Soviet Society: Reflections on the Breakthrough of Voluntary Association in Russian Karelia', in Antti Laine & Mikko Ylikangas (eds.), *Rise and Fall of Soviet Karelia*. Helsinki: Kikimora 2002, 193.

41 LP, 10 Apr. 1991.

42 *Izvestiya*, 10 Apr. 1991.

The letters to the editor reported an increasing number of everyday problems. One pensioner had never experienced such a shortage; there had been no medicine for four months. Another one complained that it was impossible to survive with such high prices. The voices raised against those proclaiming 'freedom', 'pluralism' and 'sovereignty' were becoming stronger[43].

Pravda had introduced a column 'The ordinary life of ordinary people,' which featured letters to the editor. These letters often dealt with everyday problems. The message was clear: the ordinary lives of the ordinary people were difficult, filled with problems.

Market relations had started to develop: the first commercial sales of foreign currency took place, with prices three times higher than the official currency rate (*Izvestiya*, 8 April 1991). There was a new kind of problem, however. *Izvestiya* reported that a brigade of farm workers had collected water-melons but the *sovkhoz* manager refused to pay them and suggested they sell the melons on the market. They did so, but the profit appeared to be too small and the leader of the brigade was arrested. After *Izvestiya* made the case public, it was taken to the Supreme Court of the USSR, and the leader of the brigade was acquitted. According to the paper, under the new conditions it was not enough to go by the letter of the law, and that in this case

> account should be taken of the socio-economic situation, common sense and economic necessity. It is really absurd that the country is starving, but Vasya sits in jail... Someone has been imprisoned, who fell into market conditions and was forced to work according to market rules. He supplied consumers with goods and the sovkhoz with income it would not otherwise have received.[44]

On the local level the problems were related to everyday issues, such as the shortages of tobacco, foreign currency in the banks, problems with telephone lines and unemployment. The newspapers took an active role in investigating these problems, and this was apparent in the stories. One example is the following:

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43 *Pravda*, 15 Apr. 1991.

44 *Izvestiya*, 9 Apr. 1991.

> From the morning of 9 April, the editorial office of *Leninskaya Pravda* started to receive phone calls from the citizens of the Kukkovka district. The people were interested in the question: Why is there no hot water in the houses? [45]

When the paper made inquiries it emerged that the problem was related to the repair work, which was now finished, and the hot-water supply was restored.

There were also articles in which the aim was to warn about problems, such as a story about venereal diseases, which had increased in Karelia especially among the young. The story (an interview with a doctor) exposed the reasons for this and suggested what parents should do in order to help prevent the diseases from spreading.

Often the comments made by the journalist or another contributor at the end of the story offered no solution: 'If all this is called market relations in formation, what awaits us in the future?'[46].

In sum, many new problems appeared in 1991 due to the reforms, and they were made public. The solutions were not as easily found, and there was also evidence of competition between the Russian and Soviet authorities.

DISCUSSION

In Soviet journalism social problems were described in newspapers as something that affected 'us all,' and which could be solved through common effort and by the implementation of political decisions. The newspapers could assist in this. The problems were mainly manageable and solutions could be found, even if many of the pre-perestroika problems were solved only formally by removing some individuals from leading positions while the structural reasons remained unchanged. The faith the omnipotence of the system, however, was not shaken.

During glasnost the focus on social problems and the role assigned to the press in Soviet society brought the public discontent out into

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45 *LP*, 11 Apr. 1991.

46 The journalist V. Sidorovich in *Severnyi Kurier*, 14 Sep. 1991.

the open, which further encouraged its public expression. The press was encouraged by the Soviet leadership to exaggerate Soviet economic problems. Jerry F. Hough[47] even calls this "the hysteria over the minor economic problems of 1989" in comparison to the "horrendous depression of the 1990s". The positive role of the press in the remedying of social problems appeared to be dysfunctional, when freedom of criticism was promoted in conditions of increasing economic problems. In the words of Paasilinna, 'the glasnost medication failed; the patient overdosed and died'[48].

Scholars largely disagree on whether the collapse of the Soviet Union was inevitable[49] and even on whether there were structural reasons behind the collapse. In light of the study on the changed framing of social problems in the official media it seems that both the traditional role of the media in Soviet society and the changes in official media under glasnost contributed to the collapse of the social system if not to the collapse of the Soviet state. The changes in the official media during perestroika that contributed to weakened faith in the infallibility of the system. The publications in the official media presented to people officially sanctioned ways of public discourse and only after the criticism and alternative views were published in official media did they became part of public life.

In retrospect, it seems clear that the policies of perestroika and glasnost failed because of economic problems and a legitimation crisis. With a prospering economy and general public faith in the reform of the social system, the effect of glasnost policy would not have been as disastrous as it turned out to be. Glasnost policy, however, precipitated the collapse by making the problems and exchange of opinions public. It abolished the fear of conflicting opinions and of expressing unorthodox views but it did not create a platform on which the opinions could be presented and solutions found in a way which would be constructive and useful for the system. The lesson of democracy was learned, but

47 Jerry F. Hough, *Democratization and Revolution in the USSR, 1985–1991*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution 1997, 254.

48 Paasilinna, *Glasnost and Soviet Television*, 189

49 Stephen E. Hanson, 'Reform and Revolution in the Late Soviet Context', *Slavic Review* 63 (2004), 527-34.

not in a way which would have made possible the conservation of the Soviet system.

The framing of problems in such a way that no solutions could be found was clearly demoralising in the glasnost era, when everyday problems and shortcomings also became more acute. The social system with which people were accustomed to live and to which they were adapted began to lose its infallibility. Both reforms and a total change of system gained support. The reforms increased acute problems and the collapse of the system began to be accepted, and even welcomed. The new role of the media contributed to the downfall of the Soviet system: the new solutions could be debated and alternative futures were made imaginable, while the preservation of the former system by the use of force was not seen as a potential or an acceptable option. Therefore, the media played an essential role in the process and significantly contributed to the peaceful nature of the transformation.