

Revolution II? Not yet

Understanding what is going on in the Soviet Union these days is exceptionally difficult. Misinterpreting events there is all too easy, as the *Globe and Mail* showed this week.

"Full-blooded democracy demanded by Gorbachev" screamed the *Globe's* headline on Wednesday, quoting the Soviet leader. The story was a long report on the important party conference under way in Moscow that did not quite support the dramatic headline.

But it did have a breathless air of optimism untempered by the realities of Soviet history or *realpolitik* we often see in the media. For readers who are not Sovietologists, the *Globe* seemed to convey the impression that the USSR was suddenly being transformed by Gorbachev into a western-style parliamentary democracy. This is unfortunately not true.

Mikhail Gorbachev has been calling for "democratization" which should not be confused with democracy. He is speaking a different political language from the one we understand. What Gorbachev means by the term is a process of freer choice and greater political mobility within the ranks of the communist party. For example, multiple candidates would run for party offices and be elected by secret ballots.

What Gorbachev does not mean is our system of democracy, whose basis is free speech, free association and the right to form opposition parties.

So far, Gorbachev has made perfectly clear the communist leadership will not tolerate any real political opposition. Doing so would violate everything held sacred by the communists.

Public criticism is being promoted by the current leadership as a way of smoking its hidebound opponents out of their hiding places in the dark nooks and crannies of the party. The Soviet Union cannot be modernized



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until the death grip of the party's old guard is broken. Doing so means slowly replacing party hacks and peeling away all the privileges that the ruling class has come to expect as a birthright.

But public criticism and shaking up the party apparatus does not mean opposition parties or true free speech. Soviet citizens and writers who have tried to press for such rudimentary rights that westerners take for granted have been arrested or cowed into silence.

Anyone who goes to the Soviet Union, as I did recently, knows that Comrade Gorbachev's USSR makes a great deal of noise about liberalization but at heart it still remains a totalitarian state where the KGB is everywhere.

Gorbachev may in his heart be trying to change the communist system; he may even be a closet liberal, as some Soviets charge, who wants to create a western-style social democracy in his nation.

He may be in the process of kicking the communist party upstairs to an advisory role and vesting true political power in the government — as predicted in this column last month.

We in the West should give him every benefit of the doubt.

But, at the same time, we must not let euphoria and

wishful thinking to so cloud our judgment that we lose sight of the realities of world affairs.

Even if the Soviet Union were to turn into another Sweden overnight or have a Czarist restoration, it would still remain a powerful, active economic and political rival to the West. Such is the immutable nature of geopolitics.

Far more likely, though, the Soviet Union will gradually modernize and, thanks to reform, pull itself out of the sloth into which it has sunk.

It will become a more efficient, more productive and happier place to live — but it will also still remain a communist state. There is no case that I can recall of a communist party ever allowing itself to lose power. Chances that the party will give up or even share power in the Vatican of world communism are about as good as the Pope becoming a Baptist.

Yes, Gorbachev will pump new blood into the system and loosen up its arthritic joints so that the nation can again move. Life will become freer and more humane. But when we see Gorbachev calling for an independent judiciary or basic human rights in the world's largest nation, and one that holds itself to be a champion of man's rights, it is painfully clear just how backward and repressive the Soviet Union still remains.

In economic rights the USSR has made progress; in human rights, however, after 71 years of life it still lags behind the Russia of Czar Nicholas II.

What the USSR will get from Gorbachev's reforms, barring a miracle of course, will not be anything like "full-blooded democracy" but tired-blooded dictatorship with most of Stalin's nastier legacies burned off.

I was told in Moscow that the current party conference would produce a "second Russian Revolution." Well, not yet — the *Globe's* enthusiasm notwithstanding.