



## Is Putin echoing Gorbachev on Ukraine?

By Cathy Young

August 31, 2022

The news that Mikhail Gorbachev, the last leader of the Soviet Union, had died at the age of 91 came amid reports that, six months into the war with Russia, Ukraine had launched a major counteroffensive in the south to retake the occupied city of Kherson. If successful, this could be a turning point in the war — perhaps forcing Russia either to withdraw in defeat or escalate the war with unpopular measures such as universal mobilization.

Gorbachev's six-year rule ended with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 — and the self-abolition of his presidential post. It is a part of Russian history with many relevancies to the current moment.

Gorbachev launched the reforms known as perestroika (restructuring) and glasnost (openness) in 1986-1987 in an attempt to breathe new life into the ossified Soviet system. But relaxing restrictions on speech and political activity unleashed forces, including demands for real freedom and democracy as well as independence movements in many Soviet republics — including Ukraine — that quickly proved uncontrollable for Gorbachev himself and for the Soviet regime.

A plan to transform the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics into a new “Union of Soviet Sovereign Republics,” a confederation with a minimal federal state, led to an attempt by Soviet hard-liners to oust Gorbachev in August 1991. The coup was defeated; but in the aftermath, the plan for the new Union collapsed and the newly independent republics became a “Commonwealth of Independent States” with no central authority.

Vladimir Putin, who rose to power less than 10 years after Gorbachev's resignation, has made no secret of his obsession with rebuilding the Soviet — or Russian — empire. Gorbachev had his own regrets about his inability to preserve the union. But after a few clashes between Soviet troops and protesters in Georgia, Lithuania and Azerbaijan in which dozens died, he made a deliberate decision to not authorize the use of force to keep the republics in line.

Gorbachev's legacy remains controversial (and deeply unpopular in Russia). Nonetheless, he paved the way for Russia's integration into the international economic and political order, and despite the hardships of transition his reforms set the stage for the affluence and options the Russian middle class has enjoyed under Putin.

But now, because of the war and the international backlash, Russia finds itself isolated. Western corporations are fleeing — even McDonald's, one of the first to arrive in Moscow during the

Gorbachev era. Travel with Europe is already complicated by lack of direct flights due to sanctions, and is likely to become harder with new visa rules. And, while the Russian economy is still doing fairly well thanks to oil sales to countries that haven't joined the boycott, the sanctions' effect is likely to grow much more crippling by next year.

With Russian enthusiasm for the war already fairly tepid — many Russians say that they support the “special operation” but also that they want it to end — will Putin face a more noticeable backlash even from the normally complacent if Russian losses and failures start to mount? With Western countries stepping up military aid to Ukraine, that's a real possibility.

No one can predict where instability in Russia may lead. But it's possible that, like Gorbachev, Putin will unintentionally cause the country he's trying to “save” to disintegrate — this time into smaller regions.

One thing is certain: Unlike Gorbachev, Putin will not be remembered as a statesman or a peacemaker.

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