Glasnost

Encyclopedia of Russian History
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# **GLASNOST**

*Glasnost* is a Russian word that proved fateful for the Soviet communist empire in its last years of existence. Variously translated as "openness," "transparency," or "publicity," its root sense is public voice or speech. Freedom of speech is a close Western equivalent.

Upon his rise to power in 1985 as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the [Soviet Union](http://www.encyclopedia.com/places/commonwealth-independent-states-and-baltic-nations/cis-and-baltic-political-geography/union), [Mikhail Gorbachev](http://www.encyclopedia.com/people/history/russian-soviet-and-cis-history-biographies/mikhail-sergeyevich-gorbachev) introduced glasnost as one of a troika of slogans in his campaign to reform a faltering Soviet system. He called for glasnost (openness) in public discussion, perestroika (restructuring) in the economy and political system, and *novoye mneniya* (new thinking) in foreign policy. All three slogans broke away from the ideology-laden sloganeering of past Soviet leaders and suggested movement away from dictatorship to a more open and democratic Soviet future.

While Gorbachev made perestroika the troika's centerpiece, glasnost was the most potent in bringing new political forces and formerly silenced voices onto the political stage. The notion of a public voice distinct from the ruling power and the idea of open public debate ran hard against the Soviet ideological system.

Before Gorbachev, the regime recognized no public voice beyond the voice of the *nomenklatura,* the Communist Party hierarchy, speaking to its subjects through state-controlled media. All nonpolitical, literary, academic, and scientific publication was subject to the strictures of the party line and censorship.

Glasnost made its initial and unofficial appearance during the rule of Leonid Brezhnev, Gorbachev's predecessor. A small but vocal dissident movement (also known as the Democratic Movement) broke through the regime's facade of ideological conformity. It produced an underground press, *samizdat* (lit. self-publishing), which gave voice to a wide range of opinion and criticism at odds with the official line. A notable moment in samizdat came when Andrei Sakharov, the famed Soviet nuclear physicist and advocate of civil and democratic rights, published an unauthorized essay in 1968. He appealed to the top leaders to move toward glasnost and democracy as the path toward overcoming the country's urgent problems. Entitled *Progress, Coexistence and Intellectual Freedom,* the essay, written in typescript, circulated widely inside the [USSR](http://www.encyclopedia.com/places/commonwealth-independent-states-and-baltic-nations/cis-and-baltic-political-geography/union) and was smuggled to the West. Sakharov's outspokenness led the Brezhnev regime to exile him in 1980 to the closed city [Gorky](http://www.encyclopedia.com/places/commonwealth-independent-states-and-baltic-nations/cis-and-baltic-political-geography/gorky), far from [Moscow](http://www.encyclopedia.com/places/commonwealth-independent-states-and-baltic-nations/cis-and-baltic-political-geography/moscow) and Western media sources. In a symbolic gesture of his glasnost policy, Gorbachev freed Sakharov from exile six years later and allowed him to return to Moscow.

Though Sakharov's essay may well have influenced Gorbachev, Gorbachev's version of glasnost was limited and aimed at a controlled change and liberalizing reform of the Soviet system without destroying its foundations. Yet, despite his effort to keep glasnost within manageable limits, it opened the door ever wider to an intensifying and searching public debate challenging the Soviet order itself. Newspapers, journals, once-banned books, and revelations from archives appeared and found appreciative audiences. Glasnost as transparency brought to light what the regime had hidden. Revelation upon revelation of its record of mass repressions, abuses, lies, and corruption were publicized, deepening its disrepute among the public at large. Glasnost also gave voice to long-suppressed national independence movements within the empire, which contributed to its disintegration. Defenders of the old order warned Gorbachev that glasnost was a "two-edged sword" that could turn against its user. Yegor Ligachev, a fellow member of the Politburo, aimed a barb at Gorbachev that it was not wise to enter a room if you do not know the way out. And, in fact, the explosion of the nuclear reactor in Chernobyl, [Ukraine](http://www.encyclopedia.com/places/commonwealth-independent-states-and-baltic-nations/cis-and-baltic-political-geography-91), severely tested Gorbachev's commitment to glasnost.

Gorbachev's glasnost policy was a major factor precipitating and informing the political struggle developing in the leadership in the latter half of the 1980's and culminating in the coup of August 1991. The struggle began in earnest in the fall of 1987 with a split inside the ruling Politburo. Yegor Ligachev, former ally of Gorbachev, became his adversary on the right. Boris Yeltsin became his rival in the cause of reform on the left. Second in command in the Politburo, Ligachev defended the interests of the nomenklatura against Gorbachev's reforms. Yeltsin, who entered the Politburo under Gorbachev's patronage from provincial Sverdlovsk, pressed for a faster pace of reform than Gorbachev was then ready to promote. At a Central Committee meeting in October 1987, Yeltsin attacked Ligachev for sabotaging his reform efforts as Moscow party chief and accused Gorbachev of foot-dragging on perestroika. The upshot was Yeltsin's ouster from the Politburo and then as Moscow party secretary. His fall was a blessing in disguise for Yeltsin and freed him subsequently to rise as a popular leader untainted by association with the ruling group.

Despite his effort to control glasnost, Gorbachev soon found himself driven to more radical measures by the dynamic of the new political world that glasnost was bringing into play. First he proposed at a party plenum in January 1987 that party leaders be elected from below instead of by cooptation from above. He ran into a wall of resistance from local and regional party secretaries who feared losing power. He then turned to shifting his own base of power from the party to a new parliamentary body with constitutional powers beyond the reach of party control. In March 1989 he realized his project. A Congress of Peoples Deputies was instituted with two-thirds of its deputies popularly elected and a third selected from party and other official organizations. The Congress became a platform of open public debate televised to the whole country. Andrei Sakharov led the democratic grouping (Interregional Group) in opposition to the party nomenklatura. Sakharov lent his great prestige and the fire of his moral passion to the sharp and open debate in the body (often to Gorbachev's irritation as the presider) and galvanized public opinion against Communist Party abuses. Though conservative party elements held a large majority in the Congress, they found themselves on the defensive in the face of withering criticism from the Sakharov-led opposition. Glasnost was winning the day, but Gorbachev's grip on public debate and democratic reform began to slip. The introduction of popular elections was reversing the political thrust in the heart of the Soviet system. Power from above was increasingly challenged by power coming from below.

Yeltsin lost no time in using the electoral process Gorbachev brought into being. In Moscow he won a seat in the Congress by landslide, and after Sakharov's death in December, he assumed Sakharov's place as leader of the democratic faction. He also won a seat in the parliament of the Russian Federation, the body that elected Yeltsin its president in May 1990. At his initiative the Russian presidency was made into a national elective office, and in June 1991 he handily won that office in a national election, becoming the first Russian leader so chosen. Yeltsin became a powerful challenger to Gorbachev and to the Soviet system itself. Glasnost and democratic reform were no longer Gorbachev's preserve. What formerly had been a mere facade of Russian self-government now became a second center of authority in the land.

As rivalry between Gorbachev and Yeltsin unfolded, conservative elements inside the party were marshaling their forces to challenge Gorbachev and suppress glasnost and the democratic movement. Gorbachev now walked a tightrope between rightwing forces and the Yeltsin-led forces on the left. Gorbachev's effort to shore up his presidential powers and build his base in the Congress of Peoples Deputies and its Supreme Soviet was ineffectual. His popularity plummeted as Yeltsin's soared.

Leaders of the party's old guard finally struck in August 1991. They sought to employ all the Soviet agencies of repression against the developing democratic and national revolution. They organized an emergency committee, seized power in its name, declared martial law, sent an armada of tanks into Moscow, and put Gorbachev under house arrest in his vacation dacha in the [Crimea](http://www.encyclopedia.com/places/commonwealth-independent-states-and-baltic-nations/cis-and-baltic-political-geography/crimea). Yeltsin defied the perpetrators of the coup from atop a tank in front of the White House (the Russian parliament building), drawing a mass of supporters around him. The standoff ended when the military and special forces refused the emergency committee's orders to crush the opposition. The Russian democratic and national revolution under Boris Yeltsin's lead dissolved the emergency committee, arresting its members and the coup participants. The Russian Federation assumed full authority in its territories, abolished the Soviet Communist Party, and ushered the Soviet Union out of existence at the end of the year. The principal nations that had been subjected to the Soviet empire gained their independence. Gorbachev became a private citizen, and his rival, Yeltsin, went on to lead the resurrected Russian republic.

Before his death in December 1989, Sakharov, in a private encounter with Gorbachev, forewarned him that if he continued to seek unlimited power without standing for election, he would one day find himself without public support in a leadership crisis. Gorbachev was unwilling or unable to act on the clear implication that glasnost posed for his leadership, namely, that democratic legitimacy could only be secured through a process of public debate and popular election.

Though this was not his intention, Gorbachev paved the way for [Russia](http://www.encyclopedia.com/places/commonwealth-independent-states-and-baltic-nations/cis-and-baltic-political-geography/russia)'s historical return as a nation-state and in the form of a democratic republic. His taking up of the cause of glasnost led to a renaissance of Russian intellectual and political life. Despite instability and a perilous transition from Soviet despotism to a fledgling republic, glasnost continued to be the rule in the new Russia's first decade, in the provisions of its new constitution, the existence of free public debate, and a series of orderly and reasonably fair parliamentary and presidential elections. Whether the spirit of glasnost prevails or wanes in the post-Yeltsin era was yet to be determined as the reborn Russia entered the twenty-first century. One thing was clear: glasnost would go down in the annals of Russian history as the potent word that brought down an empire.

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