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# **A Comparative Review of the Opportunities, Agendas and Performances of Mikhail Gorbachev (1985-1991) and Vladimir Putin (1999-)**

<https://www.e-ir.info/2008/09/03/a-comparative-review-of-the-opportunities-agendas-and-performances-of-mikhail-gorbachev-1985-1991-and-vladimir-putin-1999/>

JUSTA HOPMA, SEP 3 2008

In this piece I will focus upon leader *type* and the conditions encountered. Necessarily, numerous important aspects essential to a good evaluation leadership will be left out: ascendancy to power, style and vision, among others. Many factors in leadership analysis are abstract which makes it a study dealing with high levels of uncertainty and subjectivity. A comparison between two leaders then, almost seems inutile. Common academic practice is to compare like with like, so how is it possible to compare two leaders who lived in different times and systems? The aim of this piece however is not to provide a conclusive assessment, but to consider different aspects of leadership. In examining leader-type and surveying conditions that surround a leader, light is shed upon the significance of the individual and upon the different purposes of leadership in a particular day and age.

## **Conditions**

In studying Putin's and Gorbachev's presidencies the significance of time and place becomes clear. Conditions in the political and economical environment, but also legacies of the past can seriously constrain presidents. Especially the state of the economy is of foremost influence, as it provides an administration with hard currency to implement its policies. In the 1970's oil prices dramatically fell and Gorbachev experienced the dire consequences. Putin on the other hand enjoys high oil prices and benefited from the Rubble's devaluation. He could present impressive growth figures that not only improved Putin's image as a capable leader, but also provided capital.

On the political level, leaders can be pressurized or supported. In Russia most leaders align themselves with the elite in the first stage of their presidency in order to consolidate their power. Success as a leader depends to a large extent on whether one can maintain and expand existing power bases. Gorbachev for example initially sympathized with the conservatives within the party to 'get his reforms through' but once he realized it didn't work, he aligned himself with

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radicals. Eventually, all support for the reform program was lost and Gorbachev was left without any political credibility. The individual has control over these matters to a certain extent, but not entirely. The composition of the Duma proved to be favourable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but it is actually the first time in history that a Russian president oversees a constructive Duma.[1]

In addition, leaders' tasks and possibilities are defined by legacies of the past. In the Soviet Union, an economic slowdown had been ongoing for decades before Gorbachev came into power. Brezhnev's belief in gradual change and a refusal to upset power elites, had led to a continued build-up of the crisis. In 2000 when Putin came into power, Yeltsin and indeed arguably Gorbachev, had already introduced market capitalism in Russia. Some of the large dilemmas about Russia's future identity had been more or less solved. Essential questions relating to the contents of the constitution and presidency had been answered. 'Russia does not face the same kind of legitimacy crisis as the USSR, which had to contend with the discrediting of the communist ideology with which the state was so tightly intertwined.' [2] Russian society has progressed since the fall of the Soviet Union and it is interesting to ask to what extent Gorbachev paved the way for Putin. However, the word limit of this essay prevents from doing so.

It has to be noted that Russia's political system has undergone considerable change since Gorbachev left office. (see chart on following page) In the Soviet days, the party was the ultimate source of power; today that power lies with the president. Moreover, the Russian presidency is a very strong one. The president appoints the Prime Minister, oversees all top appointments to the executive branch and has some legislative power in the form of presidential decrees. The result is a personalized presidency with large constitutional powers. Putin has benefited of the shape of this presidency, he has been able to appoint like-minded in the positions he wanted and successfully consolidated his power base. Gorbachev had to work within a rigid hierarchical structure in which ideological concepts severely constrained him.[3]

## **Type of Leader**

"Personality, world-view and character form an integrated pattern: the man develops a combination which makes psychological sense for him. " James Barber recognizes that motivation is build up out of several complex and interrelated aspects, but puts special emphasis on personality. Personality shapes performance, hence we can predict a president's effectiveness by analyzing personality.[4]

Barber believes that leaders can be categorized according to their activity level and enjoyment of political

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involvement. Gorbachev and Putin would both be typified as active-positives. Putin is renowned for his ability to 'get things done'. In the early months of his presidency he initiated tax reforms that brought an increased degree of transparency. A favourable effect on the investment climate quickly followed. Gorbachev was widely recognized as a dynamic, adaptive leader with infinite energy.

Barber's criterion of enthusiasm for the job is difficult to measure. Accounts of colleagues and overall impression provide some insight, but can hardly account for sound evidence. "Gorbachev was an idealist whose beliefs and actions were sustained by a passionate and optimistic, yet carefully controlled personality."

"As one close aid is reported to have said in the late 1980's: "I know we can't succeed. But when I get in front of that warm and charming man who wants to do something for the country, I have no heart to tell him that we can't succeed."

Putin is harder to measure; he never saw politics as his destiny, his demeanour is often described as cold and unfathomable, his character tough and his regime authoritarian. This does not shed any light on whether he enjoys his job and yet Putin is commonly described as a successful leader. Barber's scheme therefore is no sufficient tool for analyzing leadership. The theory is incomprehensive; it leaves no room for investigating ideological beliefs or for transgression between the categories. Neither can the tool grasp the depths of motivational forces, nor is the 'evidence' used in assigning categories objective. Burns takes leadership analysis to a more sophisticated level and distinguishes between transactional and transformational leadership. Transactional leadership concerns quantitative changes such as substitution of policies, bargaining and give and take strategies. Gorbachev however, has been widely recognized as a *transformational* leader.[5] He was always interested in concepts and ideas, but the actual situation in the Soviet Union forced him to develop a new representation of the country's problems. Two speeches, one held by Brezhnev and the other by Gorbachev were content-analyzed. Both speeches covered peaceful coexistence, but Gorbachev considered more dimensions and in doing so he placed the concept of US hostility in a more intricate setting.[6] The word limit of this piece does not allow further sociological inquiry, but it isn't hard to see how increased subtlety in perception leads to a more realistic security concept and perhaps to policy change. Such rhetoric and thinking are the foundations for transformation: 'It (transformation) means alterations so comprehensive and pervasive, and perhaps accelerated, that new cultures and value systems take the place of the old.'[7] Burns believes that creative leadership lies at the root of social transformation because of its catalytic effect. Leaders that come up with new ideas try to take their followers with them, the followers respond, which provides the leader with new stimuli and society as a whole transforms in the process. Therefore, the leader is a major force, but interaction with followers is necessary to realize transformative change.

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Burns states that interaction of creative people and “social conditions that make for an inventive and resourceful people willing to challenge established ideas and practices” are essential in achieving successful societal change. Indeed, this type of interaction was unheard of in Soviet Russia. “Seven decades of Soviet policies aimed at alienating citizens from each other in order to discourage any kind of independent association among them taught the Soviet citizen that political participation was usually pointless and often dangerous.”[8]

Reasons for the collapse of the Soviet Union are intertwined and complex, but in the context of leadership studies, the lack of a constructive leader-follower relationship is a contributory aspect.

Does leadership entail more than management? Did Gorbachev fail to manage the Russian economy, but succeed in leading the country to the next level in historical progress? Do leadership and management concern separate skills or do they overlap?

‘While Putin is undoubtedly a reformer, his approach to change is no longer one of systemic transformation but of management.’[9] Research conducted after Burns’ coining of transactional and transformational leadership led to the conclusion that there were more dimensions within the two types of leadership and that a leader could also be neither or both.[10] ‘Transactional leadership however, is related to ‘substituting one thing for another, to give and take, to exchange places, to pass from one place to another.’[11] A manager responds and reacts, plans and sets goals. Putin’s major achievements or points of approval as perceived by the international community are the following: Economic growth. In response to successful growth rates Putin set the goal of doubling GDP within 6 years; tax reform laws that enhanced transparency and improved the business climate; a firm reaction to 9/11 terrorism which arguably brought Russia substantial material benefits[12]. Burns based his ideas on Max Weber’s distinction between economic and non-economic sources of authority. Seemingly, Putin’s administration has authority or, is successful, for economic reasons. It can be argued therefore, that Putin’s leadership clearly fits into the managerial category.

If Gorbachev is a transforming leader and Putin’s leadership displays the characteristics of management, a logical question would be whether these presidencies also serve different purposes.

## Purpose

Literature suggests that Gorbachev needed to *transform* political society in order to achieve his economic goals. Putin’s policy objective however, is one of consolidation: strengthening the state was his main goal after entering the

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office.[13] This notion makes sense if the assumption that leaders respond to their predecessors and the circumstances is accepted. Gorbachev not only dealt with the consequences of Brezhnev's policy failure but with those of an entire system. Putin responded to Yeltsin's introduction of capitalism into the country. In the 1990's Russia was introduced to capitalism in a ruthless manner that led to the enrichment of a small portion of the population and to the exhaustion of Russia's resources. Yeltsin sold many valuable assets and assigned influential posts to his friends. Putin has attacked this type of corruption and very much emphasizes law and order. He has taken a more assertive stance in defending Russian interests as to prevent an exodus of riches as experienced in the 1990's.

Contextual factors therefore have a significant influence upon a president's time in office and hence a president's eventual 'failure' or 'success'. Researchers tried to identify sets of contextual factors that influence transformational leadership. No generally accepted set has been found though, because different types or 'conceptualizations' of leadership were studied. Researchers concluded that contextual factors are very much determined by the phenomenon under study. One powerful explanatory factor however, in studying the effect of different conditions on leaders is 'receptivity'. [14] The graph below identifies two types of environment/conditions: a positive polar type receptive to change which requires a 'context-harnessing' leadership and a negative polar type, that undermines transformational leadership and hence needs 'context-confronting leadership.' Context-harnessing behaviour calls for protection of the organizational context while context-confronting behaviour involves a thoroughly destructive process to induce change.

This explains how Gorbachev could be a true transformational leader while not succeeding in the pursuit of his goals. 'In such non-receptive contexts, even transformational leadership fails to generate commitment of organizational members, no matter how appealing and appropriate the vision.' [15] Moreover, the graph could also support the assumption that Putin's management approach could lead into transformational change, provided he expresses a vision and instils new values in society: two other requirements for transformational leadership. [16] This speculation however requires further research, or eventually time will tell.

## **Assessment and its Accuracy**

'Transformational leadership's achievement is measured, finally, by the same standards it has used to condemn the old regime: fulfilment of the principles it professes.' [17] Thus, if principles aren't fulfilled when a leader leaves, transformational leadership has failed? This is hard to digest if one acknowledges the significance of circumstances and the constraints they bring along. In addition, does failed transformational leadership mean that nothing or no

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desirable changed has been realized? Not necessarily. This leads to questioning the accuracy of performance assessment. As demonstrated above, leadership cannot be studied in isolation and this is also true for *evaluation* of performance. Some useful questions are: How limited was a leader in the pursuit of his goals? What would the situation have been like with a different person in power?

‘With trying to imagine how these constraints and forces would have evolved in the absence of the leader in question, or in the presence of either a stronger or weaker leader, we cannot estimate either the magnitude of the opportunity or the indispensability of a given leader for exploiting it.’ [18]

It is in answering these questions that a leader’s individual traits, strategies and contribution to transformational change is measured.

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*Written by: Justa Hopma*

*Written at: Aberystwyth University*

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