

'Freedom? What freedom?' from Le Monde (28 May 1988)

Caption: On 28 May 1988, the French daily newspaper Le Monde outlines the political programme of the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, who is seeking to transform the Soviet Union into a 'Socialist State'.

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. Fontaine, André. 28.05.1988, n° 13.477; 45e année. Paris: Le Monde. "Quelle liberté ?", p. 1.

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Freedom? What freedom?

It is no coincidence that the ‘theses’ that Mikhail Gorbachev will invite the Congress of the Soviet Communist Party to adopt next month were published on the eve of President Ronald Reagan’s arrival in Moscow. For the Soviet leader, this lengthy document represents a demonstration in two ways.

First: he has ‘everyone behind him’ when discussing major international issues with his guest. This very Gorbachevian programme has already been considered by the Politburo and the Central Committee. Beyond a doubt, there is some mute opposition in those quarters. Yet it is clear that, at least for the time being, the Soviet leader’s adversaries are not in a position to block his initiatives.

Second: he continues to forge ahead with his policies of restructuring and democratising society in the USSR. In his characteristic way, Mr Gorbachev emerges with renewed vigour from the spring crisis — from the Caucasian problems to the quarrel with Yegor Ligachev through the intermediary of the press. Not only does he not flinch, but, in criticising the past and defining future projects, he at once bounds forward by several extra steps.

This time, the emphasis is on establishing the ‘rule of law’, based on anticipated support from every imaginable population group. On the eve of discussions in which Mr Reagan is determined to lay heavy emphasis on human rights, Mr Gorbachev is showing that he is mindful of this issue and has his own views on the matter.

It remains true that the Soviet and Western concepts of freedom differ somewhat. Just one example is Moscow’s obvious annoyance at the plan for President Reagan to meet some Soviet dissidents. For Gorbachev, the political debate can develop only on ‘Socialist terrain’. Anyone seeking a different venue is putting himself on the margins of society — even if the number of people on those margins is constantly increasing, as can be seen from the re-emergence of religion and national idiosyncrasies.

Mr Gorbachev’s project, even within the limits that he has set, is encountering all sorts of difficulties. These are, indeed, mentioned in the ‘theses’, which denounce bureaucracy, conservatism and dogmatism willy-nilly. In a nutshell, things are changing but all too slowly. While there can be no doubt about the Soviet leader’s will to reform or the energy that he expends on framing that reform in laws, it has to be admitted that, with very few exceptions, little of that reform has yet filtered down into everyday life or the economy of the Soviet Union. This is the ‘terrain’ that will make or break Gorbachev’s popularity and, with it, in the longer term, his success.