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What Brezhnev Can Teach Us About Putin

By Pyotr Romanov

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Today marks 50 years since Leonid Brezhnev became leader of the Soviet Union. A party conspiracy led to the ouster of the fractious former Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, who had stirred up a great deal of trouble for the party elite. He was replaced by "dear Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev." In fact, I don't think anyone ever called him anything but "dear."

Brezhnev occupied the post of general secretary from 1964 to 1982 and was well liked by both the ruling elite and the Soviet people.

A 2013 poll by the Levada Center pollster revealed that 56 percent of Russians have positive feelings about Brezhnev, which makes him the most popular Russian leader of the 20th century.

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era.

The period that political scientists now contemptuously refer to as the "era of stagnation" was, and still remains, in the public mind, actually one of the most prosperous.

It seems to me that the term "stagnation" does not really fit here. It is true that the country did not take any great leaps forward during this time, that this pause turned out to be extremely inopportune and that the Soviet Union paid a price for it later, but, unfortunately, the "time out" was also inevitable. Brezhnev gave the Soviet Union a "breather" before the onset of new hardships and challenges.

This phenomenon occurs repeatedly in Russian history. Having survived the Time of Troubles before the establishment of the Romanov dynasty, the Russian people later looked back with gratitude on the quiet reign of the imbecilic Tsar Fyodor Ivanovich, and after the arduous reforms of Peter the Great, they felt real nostalgia for the days of Regent of Russia Sophia Alekseyevna.

The Brezhnev period was likewise the only oasis of calm between Lenin, Stalin and Khrushchev — that is, between revolution, war, terror and Khrushchev's chaotic reforms on one hand — and Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of perestroika, which was compounded by the painful 1990s, on the other.

However much some liberals might find it distasteful, the fact remains that the people forgave Brezhnev for the Afghan War, the Soviet tanks on the streets of Prague, his infantile and idiotic infatuation with medals on his jacket and his slurred speech at party forums.

They have stronger memories of other things — the 1980 Summer Olympics with its charming Misha the Bear mascot and how Brezhnev gave such a passionate kiss to East German leader Erich Honecker.

Jokes about Brezhnev abounded, but they were not mean-spirited. Everyone knew that he loved hunting, women and drinking — all weaknesses that the average Russian readily forgave.

And finally, it is during such periods of outward "stagnation" that deep down, the "leavening agents" of society begin to stir and will later give rise to major future changes.

In the Brezhnev era, those "leavening agents" were the dissident movement and the growing opposition within the Communist Party that later gave rise to the reforming policy of perestroika under Gorbachev.

These times are somewhat similar to the Brezhnev era. Once again, the Russian people are dozing, somewhere in the depths of society the distant lightning of future changes is flashing and a popular leader who has long remained in office has skillfully built a relationship with those around him and with his people.

Therefore, if the people forgave Brezhnev for the war in Afghanistan, today's Russians will forgive President Vladimir Putin the Western sanctions imposed over the conflict in Ukraine.

Of course, there are also many differences between these two periods. For example, Brezhnev was no workaholic. As an experienced party apparatchik, he only retained personal control over staffing decisions. He considered everything else "secondary," although he applied that label to a great many important issues.

Andrei Gromyko, whom Brezhnev sincerely respected and trusted, handled foreign affairs. Brezhnev himself, like former U.S. President George W. Bush, had a poor grasp of geography and muddled everything without written prompts: the names of countries, their capitals and especially foreign leaders.

Alexei Kosygin dealt very professionally with ongoing issues of government and economics. The experienced Defense Minister Dmitry Ustinov handled matters of national security. And so on.

However, Putin is very different. Even during the four years that he formally worked as prime minister under former President Dmitry Medvedev, Putin never relaxed his grip on the levers of power. He has centralized power to an unprecedented degree.

We know what brought an end to the Brezhnev era, but we can only guess what will put an end to the Putin era. The two periods are also similar in that the opposition, as it tugs on the shoulder of the slumbering populace, once again has little idea of what it will do with those people once they finally awaken.

And that is why there is absolutely no guarantee that the perestroika of the future will ultimately succeed.

As writer Kurt Vonnegut rightly pointed out: "Considering the experience of past centuries, can a reasonable person entertain the slightest hope that humanity has a bright future?"

I share his lack of historical optimism.

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