“We've Got a Special Way of Thinking”

On the Establishment of the Soviet Presidency

Interview with GEORGY SHAKHNAZAROV

Georgy Shakhnazarov has been credited with having advised Gorbachev to allow and even encourage the East European revolutions of 1989 which swept away communism in the western flank of the Warsaw Pact. In fact, Shakhnazarov, who is originally from Armenia, was more than Gorbachev's adviser on Eastern Europe (1988 to 1991), but also a major force domestically, having advised the Soviet president on several other issues of perestroika. He also served in the USSR Supreme Soviet as a deputy chairman of the Committee on Legislation, Legality and the Rule of Law and as chairman of the Subcommittee on Constitutional Law. It was in this capacity in which he was called upon to assist in the establishment of the USSR presidency in 1989. He currently serves in the Gorbachev Foundation as the director for Global Programs. The interview was conducted for Demokratizatsiya by Yegor Kuznetsov of the Gorbachev Foundation.

Kuznetsov: Georgy Khoasrovich, who was the first to raise the question about the necessity of having the post of USSR president?

Shakhnazarov: It is difficult to tell now because the first to speak up were the newspapers. Many jurists published their articles. As far as I can remember, Fyodor Burlatsky1 and someone else were maintaining that it was necessary to take advantage of the situation. They said if we were building a new system, we should introduce the presidency right away as the most suitable form of search for the supreme power in our country.

Kuznetsov: And do you remember how you, together with Vadim Medvedev,2 sent a note to Mikhail Gorbachev in which you had already envisaged the post of president?

Shakhnazarov: Yes, we did that as far back as the very beginning of 1985. So, without claiming the credit too much, one may say that this issue was put before the general secretary for the first time in our note. I have no doubts that many others suggested to him the same thing, but he simply was not prepared for that. He believed it was necessary to preserve the system of the soviets, where there is no place for a president. Since a Parliament was set up, he later on came to the conclusion that we would need the appropriate structure of executive power. The word “president” was mentioned a thousand times. They were speaking about the president of the United States, the president of France, and in this connection it came to mind that having a president of our own would be a good thing. However, all that had no follow-up. In reality, we started to think about that only at the time of formulating our system. This was before the 19th Party Conference in 1988, which
practically triggered a real political reform. Previously, it was just lip service leading to nowhere.

**Kuznetsov:** What was the balance of forces in the Politburo during the 19th Party Conference?

**Shakhnazarov:** The Politburo discussed the theses of the Conference several times, then the report itself. These documents were unanimously approved. I cannot remember that anyone objected. The praises were always high. Each time Gorbachev presented the next document, all members and candidate members of the Politburo, including Yegor Ligachev and Nikolai Ryzhkov, noted that it was an outstanding event, a historical milestone and so on. True, after the ritual appraisals some amendments were proposed. Ligachev, Leningrad's First Secretary Soloviev and Oleg Baklanov insisted on stressing the leading role of the Party more vigorously. Their biggest concern was that the changes had started to undermine the position of the CPSU.

**Kuznetsov:** As I can see, the very concept of reforms was formulated in a rather narrow circle, even lesser than the Politburo itself?

**Shakhnazarov:** They were seven to eight people: Yakovlev, Medvedev, Chernyaev, Frolov, and myself. At the next stage others became involved: Primakov, Boldin, Ignatenko. At the last stage Frolov and myself were working with the active participation of Chernyaev. But, in any case, all the documents were re-edited by Gorbachev.

**Kuznetsov:** Was the unity of this small group always maintained, or were there some differences in positions?

**Shakhnazarov:** The unity never existed. There was conformity of ideas in major questions—such as the attitude to Stalinism, the need for perestroika—but with bitter arguments and disagreements. Mikhail Sergeevich would listen to us for some time, then said: “Well, that's it. Let's go on to work,” and choose one of the options.

**Kuznetsov:** This conformity of ideas remained until the introduction of the presidency?

**Shakhnazarov:** I would say yes. But then more serious disagreements began. For instance, from the very beginning I maintained that if we were to set up a parliament and a system for the division of powers, we needed to have the post of president accordingly. However, I always remained in the minority. Later on the others also came to the conclusion that this was necessary. There were arguments over how to elect a president and whether we should have a national election right away. I believed that the first elections would have to be held at the Congress of People's Deputies in order not to create a prolonged procedure. It is difficult to say now who was right and who was wrong.
There were cases when Mikhail Sergeevich remained alone. We all recommended him to resign the post of general secretary before the Conference, but he was not prepared to do so. I proposed to him to change the name of the Party to the “Social-Democratic Party of the USSR,” and to tell those who disagreed to stay away. Otherwise there would be a division. So, we had differences, although I would not say they were fundamental. Everybody believed that some day he would have to resign the post of general secretary. The question was whether the time had come or not. I think Mikhail Sergeevich was right at that time. Having resigned the post of general secretary, he would have left the Party in the hands of people who would have pushed it back resulting in the emergence of a dual power.

**Kuznetsov:** And to what extent was the introduction of the presidency at that time a means to protect Gorbachev from the Party apparat?

**Shakhnazarov:** He had no need to be protected from the apparat. The general secretary was both God and King in the Central Committee, nobody disputed his decisions. If some disagreed, they would whisper in corners behind his back. The other really bad thing was that the general secretary's orders were executed haphazardly, because many were not in sympathy with them. Practically, the apparat was running idle. But I would not say they were resisting him, especially at the beginning. A kind of danger could materialize at the Plenum.

**Kuznetsov:** When did Gorbachev's psychology start to change? When did he begin to feel more like a president than a general secretary?

**Shakhnazarov:** I think he began to feel like this before he became a president. Having already become the chairman of the Supreme Soviet, he started spending more time in the Kremlin. There he started to receive “foot-messengers” and deputies. He held meetings there with the Council of Ministers. We visited him more often in the Kremlin than in Staraya Ploshchad. The center of gravity was shifting. The only matter for which he came to the premises of the Central Committee was to hold Politburo meetings. When he became President, this situation was formalized. The corresponding apparatus was set up, which gradually began to take over the Central Committee apparatus. The situation was rather strange, though, because Boldin was in charge of both.

**Kuznetsov:** What was the political disposition after the parliamentary election? Was it an amorphous political mass or did some unions begin to form?

**Shakhnazarov:** Actually, the polarization materialized immediately at the USSR Congress of People's Deputies. All started with the speech by Andrei Sakharov, where he raised the question of the need to adopt a decree on power. Among other
items there was a demand to delimit authority between the Party and the state and to introduce a multi-party system and divide powers. At that time, Gorbachev had not yet decided on the transition to the presidency, but in Parliament this question was raised.

Kuznetsov: Was the narrow group of people who were formulating reforms still united at that time?

Shakhnazarov: It remained like that until the very end, excluding the period when Yakovlev left for some time, having “acted up,” so to speak. Frolov left to be the chief editor of Pravda. In the first months of 1991, we worked in a very small group: Chernyaev, myself, Medvedev, Boldin, plus Primakov as a newcomer.

Kuznetsov: And how did Boldin behave at the meetings?

Shakhnazarov: I would say, to the extent of his not-very-wide imagination and abilities. In fact, as a man he is average. The major contribution was made by myself, together with Frolov and Chernyaev, as well as by Yakovlev and Medvedev. We five did all the work.

Kuznetsov: When I was looking through the papers I got the impression that you worked mostly in tandem with Medvedev.

Shakhnazarov: No, I had my own job to do. For a very simple reason: each document had a general political or philosophic section, roughly speaking, twaddling around the subject. This was taken upon by Frolov and Yakovlev. Then, there was a structural and political section, concerning specific institutions, standards, procedures of introducing various new elements. This was always entrusted to me and Anatoly Lukyanov. Lastly, there was an economic section, taken upon by Medvedev. Chernyaev was responsible for the foreign policy, where I also took part. And then we all “mixed it up,” by writing various remarks to each other and so on.

Kuznetsov: Yakovlev was mostly dealing with general concepts?

Shakhnazarov: Mostly so, yes.

Kuznetsov: And what was the position of Lukyanov?

Shakhnazarov: He also often participated, especially in drafting political sections. He is an able, educated man, with vast reserves of various information. As a professional jurist, he was therefore more conservative than all the rest.

Kuznetsov: At later stages he stood up against the principle of division of powers?

Shakhnazarov: He was not so much against, as skeptical about this principle. Anyway, he insisted that it should be somehow aligned with the power of the
soviets. Certainly, he was not very jubilant when the presidency was “imposed,” considering that this was not “our way,” not fit for us. I had very bitter disputes with him, although we maintained good personal relations. The Congress of People's Deputies was his invention. I was against it. Lukyanov combines qualities of a professional jurist with revolutionary romanticism. He wrote his doctoral thesis about the Congress of Soviets, which he admired. I objected to the idea saying that this institution was a failure from the very beginning and that it became a toy in the hands of the Politburo.

Kuznetsov: Who in his inner circle was inclined to support Lukyanov's point of view?

Shakhnazarov: I would say that no one was inclined. He had no supporters in this group. He had supporters among jurists, and only because they were ready to be “yes-men” for their boss. Anyway, he was a secretary of the Central Committee, then he had a big say in the Supreme Soviet. Therefore, they ate out of his hand. But Lukyanov also had some bright ideas. He was a shrewd administrator.

Kuznetsov: What were some of the circumstances which you failed to predict?

Shakhnazarov: The first and most important, which no one could predict, was that the president would remain without power. He had no levers, no mechanism. At first, he compensated for this with the additional authority granted. He obtained this authority, but nothing came out of it. I used to tell him that this is not the case. The process of the presidency formation was overlapping with the disintegration of the Union. After Russia adopted the Declaration of Sovereignty and started to claim the territory, finances and so on, all the Soviet presidential power became next to nothing. The Supreme Soviet could give him another ten thousand special rights, but nobody would listen to him. He signed decrees, but life was going on in a different way; people were rushing not to the Kremlin, but to the Russian White House. Accordingly, it was not him who ruled in Ukraine and Kazakhstan, but Leonid Kravchuk\textsuperscript{14} and Nursultan Nazarbayev\textsuperscript{15} respectively. Therefore, he convened the heads of republics in Novo-Ogarevo, in order to consolidate, somehow, power. And when they all agreed to do something, the result was a kind of collective presidency.

Kuznetsov: What were the positive implications of introducing the presidency?

Shakhnazarov: First, some other negative elements. When the Law on the Presidency was being prepared, I advised to pass a decision on having only one president in the Union. He did not do that. On the contrary, in order to gain sympathy he was telling his counterparts in the republics: today it is me, but
tomorrow it may be you who become presidents. As a result, there would be 30 to 40 presidents. This was a corrupting factor. Later he refused to set up a real Constitutional Court, afraid of having a force above him. Instead, he created a mongrel—the Constitutional Compliance Committee.

And what about positive elements? As you say, the presidency as such means nothing. It can be real only within the framework of a certain system. If the system of division of powers takes root in this country, then the presidency will become a tradition in our society. But no one can guarantee that. Possibly, this system will not survive, and we shall return to chairmen. We've got a special way of thinking. I would say, there is no answer, as yet, to your question.

Notes

1 Fyodor Burlatsky—historian, journalist, former editor-in-chief of Literaturnaya Gazeta, people's deputy of the USSR.
2 Vadim Medvedev—member of the Politburo, then member of the Presidential Council, Gorbachev's advisor, people's deputy of the USSR.
3 Yegor Ligachev—member of the Politburo, secretary of the Central Committee. Considered a hardline rival to Gorbachev in the Party leadership.
4 Nikolai Ryzhkov—chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR.
5 Oleg Baklanov—secretary of the Central Committee for military questions, often referred to as the chief of the Soviet military-industrial complex, one of the organizers of the attempted putsch in August 1991.
6 Alexander Yakovlev—member of the Politburo, secretary of the Central Committee, then Gorbachev's senior advisor. Considered intellectual godfather of glasnost and perestroika.
7 Anatoly Chernyaev—Gorbachev's assistant.
8 Ivan Frolov—journalist, scholar, Gorbachev's assistant, then editor-in-chief of Pravda, secretary of the Central Committee, member of the Politburo.
9 Yevgeny Primakov—academician, director of the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO), now chairman of the External Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation.
10 Valery Boldin—Gorbachev's chief of staff, one of the organizers of the attempted putsch in August 1991.
11 Vitaly Ignatenko—editor-in-chief of the magazine Novoe Vremya, assistant to the president of the USSR, then general director of the ITAR-TASS news agency.
12 Staraya Ploshchad, or Old Square, is the location of CPSU Central Committee premises.
13 Anatoly Lukyanov—secretary of the Central Committee, then chairman of the USSR Supreme Soviet and one of the organizers of the attempted putsch in August 1991, now a member of the Russian Federation State Duma.
14 Leonid Kravchuk—second secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party Central Committee, now the president of Ukraine.
15 Nursultan Nazarbayev—first secretary of the Kazakhstan Communist Party Central Committee, now the president of Kazakhstan.