Before addressing the issue whether, as Djilas has stated, the Soviet system itself is now in crisis or, in Gorbachev’s own words, at least in ‘pre-crisis’, a methodological problem has to be tackled: Is Sovietology affected by glasnost’ and, if so, to what extent? Perhaps one might ask even whether Sovietology is ‘in crisis’. Here it is instructive to note the nature of the Soviet data that are more readily available of late; after all, a veritable stream of material, sometimes consisting of mutually contradictory items, is emanating now from Soviet publications – official, semi-official and non-official. While this development is highly desirable, of course, it carries with it a certain price as far as scholarship is concerned.

In this context, it may be noted that the open society, with its practically unlimited flood of unauthorised publications, has always posed a serious problem for analysts from closed societies – namely, how to distinguish authentic information from ‘background noise’. (In planning Operation Overlord in June 1944, the Allies, rather than imposing a total news blackout, decided to encourage deliberately the maximal amount of such background noise, and they succeeded in confounding the adversary).

While it is not suggested that this was the reason for the opening of certain sluices in the Soviet information flow, its effect may not be dissimilar. It is not at all clear just what is and is not authentic. Moreover, as is abundantly obvious from the rather evasive responses given by leading Soviet personalities to questions concerning the latest Soviet structural innovations, many of Gorbachev’s institutional blueprints seem to be as improvised and imperfectly thought through as were Nikita Khrushchev’s notorious ‘hare-brained schemes’. To add to the resulting chaos, constitutional drafts that effectively decrease rather than enhance local autonomy are no sooner proposed than they have to be diluted somewhat as a result of an unmistakable backlash from the non-Russian republics.
Quite apart from the problems posed by such disorder, however, there remains a more fundamental issue: the information now emanating from the USSR concerns almost entirely the ‘what’ of Soviet affairs, which, to Western minds, means policy issues. Now, undeniably, this is a matter of serious interest to us; however, it is remarkable how little authentic material continues to be available about an even more fundamental aspect of the Soviet body politic – the *kto kogo*, the ‘who-whom’ – in other words, what is the real effect of changes in personnel, in appointments and demotions, in cadres, if you will.

Western minds insist on identifying Soviet factions as derivatives of policy alignments, despite overwhelming evidence that, in closed societies, it is the other way around, namely, policy issues are used as banners, so to speak, which personality-oriented factions raise upon the battlefield to encourage their retainers and to discourage the followers of opponents. However, once the battle is over and one of the competing factions has been visibly humiliated and ousted, the victors are quite free to raise the banners of the defeated from the battlefield, as has happened time and again in Soviet history.

It is only when this aspect is understood that it becomes apparent to what extent Western analysis of Soviet affairs, particularly in the media, has enmeshed itself in endless contradictions resulting from oversimplification of Soviet power struggles as contests between ‘liberals’ or ‘reformers’, on the one hand, and ‘conservatives’ on the other. First there was a typically ‘front running’ tendency to view all leading Soviet appointees since 1985 as Gorbachevites or ‘reformers’ or ‘Westernisers’, with the conclusion that the succession struggle was all but over. Then, it became evident that such members of the ‘Class of 1985’ as Ligachev, to cite just one example, did not appear quite to fit this mould; so, in short order, he was labelled a ‘conservative’ and described as Gorbachev’s main antagonist. However, at that point, Western analysts had to explain the ouster of Boris Yel’tsin, the supposed ‘liberal’, so that they felt impelled to rebaptise him an ‘ultra-reformer’, as opposed to Gorbachev the ‘moderate reformer’. (By the way, the ‘ultra-reformer’ turned out to be the Moscow Godfather of the sinister, proto-fascist *Pamyat*’ movement, with its Great Russian chauvinistic and anti-Semitic publications, which certain Soviet authorities, especially in Leningrad, permit to fester.)

Dobrynin had been described in Western newspapers, time and again, as a source (perhaps the source) of Gorbachev’s reputedly