3 Glasnost’ vs. Freedom of the Press

The project of Liberalisers is to relax social tension and to strengthen their position in the power bloc by broadening the social base of the regime: to allow some autonomous organisation of the civil society and to incorporate the new groups into the authoritarian institutions. In light of this project, liberalisation is to be continually contingent on the compatibility of its outcomes with the interests or values of the authoritarian bloc. Thus, liberalisation is referred to as an ‘opening’ (apertura), ‘decompression’ (distensa), ‘renewal’ (odnowa) or reconstruction (perestroika).... These are terms with strong conditions of limits to reform.

Adam Przeworski

National media systems are not static. The press is both an agent and object of change and its fate is closely linked with that of the political system in which it operates. When regimes liberalize, the press frequently becomes a tool, a battleground and a prize.

In the Soviet Union, the Gorbachev leadership took a calculated risk. It believed that a liberalized press could be used to support its reform programme and to help revitalize socialism. At the same time, it believed that the process could be controlled and limited. In the final instance it lost its wager. Forces outside its control took over the liberalization process and pushed change in the Soviet polity and in the press beyond the boundaries which anyone had imagined.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine changes in the Soviet press in the Gorbachev period. Change will be examined from above, that is, from the view of the leadership, and from below, from the vantage point of the press. The chapter begins with an exploration of Gorbachev’s communications policies. Special attention is devoted both to how his policies differed from those of his predecessors and the aims and limits of glasnost’. It then examines how and why glasnost’ moved beyond the limits originally foreseen by the regime. Finally, the special role of international press coverage is addressed with particular reference to Soviet ideology.

J. A. Becker, Soviet and Russian Press Coverage of the United States © Jonathan A. Becker 1999
Although the chapter focuses on changes which took place in the Soviet Union, evidence is drawn from other cases of press liberalization, particularly those in Spain and Eastern Europe in the 1950s and 1960s. These liberalizations, while clearly different from the Soviet experience, point to revealing patterns of change.

Before moving to an examination of the Soviet press, it will be helpful to clarify what is meant by liberalization.

**LIBERALIZATION**

In studies of regime transitions, liberalization generally refers to a partial opening of an authoritarian system. This opening can potentially include the expansion of individual and collective liberties (including freedom of the press), diminishing coercion and institutional changes which notionally or actually allow the population to play a greater role in political processes. In the case of socialist-state systems, the process generally entails 'humanization', or limits on the 'scope and level of unpredictability of repressive measures', and the introduction of 'a style of ruling... more sensitive, more humane and, sometimes, more responsive to basic needs'. Liberalization can be an integral part of an articulated regime programme, a by-product of an unplanned series of compromises within the leadership or a haphazard process forced upon the regime by opposition emanating from the political sphere and society.

What does liberalization mean for press systems? Using the outline of the illustration from Chapter 1 which classifies press content according to three concentric circles — the sphere of consensus, the sphere of legitimate controversy and the sphere of deviance — we can say that liberalization means any change in the government/press relationship which produces an expansion of the sphere of legitimate controversy, or which minimally produces a significant deepening of discussion within the sphere of consensus such that issues are pushed towards legitimate controversy.

The most radical form of liberalization would entail government abandonment of negative and positive controls and the institutionalization of guarantees of press freedom. However, more typical are smaller, incremental steps. The most basic liberalization may involve little reduction in government control: the political centre can maintain strict negative and positive control over the press while manufacturing a significant broadening of debate and encouraging