

Interview with

**VALERY IVANOVICH BOLDIN**

Present at the talk was **Oleg Dmitrievich Baklanov**

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O.S. I propose that we start our talk with the following topic: How would you evaluate the domestic situation in the Soviet Union and its standing in the world by the mid-1980s? Were the problems that Gorbachev and his team faced indeed fatal, and did these problems create an irresolvable situation from which there was no escape? Many of those who were close to Gorbachev often express completely opposite opinions on this matter and sometimes even contradict themselves. For example, Chernyaev says in one place that the crisis of the Soviet system was irreversible, yet in another place he writes that the crisis was not critical. Could the Soviet system have been reformed? And even after having declared the ideology bankrupt, could we have preserved the fundamental geopolitical interests of the Soviet Union? Did we have sufficient resources for extricating ourselves from the situation that had come into being by the mid-1980s? In other words, could we have won back what we had lost?

V.B. The economic situation on the eve of Gorbachev's coming to power was somewhat exacerbated by the fact that inflation began to exceed the normal boundaries.

The first thing that happened as a result was that the population started buying up food supplies in large quantities, and, secondly, deposited huge amounts of money into their savings accounts. Labor production started to decline due to all of these factors. If you recall, it was a period when announcements were posted in all our factories and enterprises advertising a variety of high-paying jobs in various areas. And it would be disingenuous of me if I didn't talk about how in 1964 there came to power people who rather quickly lost their drive and wearied of hard work. I remember those times well. I was working on Khrushchev's team, and later with Ilichev's. I remember the great efforts devoted to removing Khrushchev from power. We had it within our capabilities to do so. But later on, age and other factors, as well as the tendency of some to rest on their laurels, weakened the intensity of our leadership's work.

If you want to talk about the core of the entire economy and how society itself functions in a Soviet-type system, then you have to realize that everything largely depends on the leader. We had Lenin, we had NEP and other energetic measures. I'm not even talking about Stalin, who conducted a purposeful program, who had an extraordinarily strong will, and who could think in a logical and consistent manner. Stalin swept aside everything that got in his way, and even what he thought was in his way.

Stalin made tremendous advances, turning a drab, peasant-based country into a rather civilized state that was the second strongest and influential power in the world. This became especially obvious after 1945.

But let's get back to the 1980s. Growth in production had slowed, but it still held at about 2 to 3 percent. We couldn't even count on a growth rate of more than 5 percent a year. The Soviet Union was a huge country with tremendous capabilities. Developing those resources required major capital investments.

O.S. I'd like to say something in this connection. As I understand it, when the Soviet economy met with economic hardships in the late '70s and early '80s, several of our top economists suggested a plan that included slowing the growth rate by one five-year plan and expanding all the "tight" places in the economy. And only after this would an upward movement begin. A struggle ensued over this plan, but ideology demanded constant ascent, and so such proposals were rejected.

V.B. Indeed, our system had to demonstrate to the world that it was constantly growing. And this is what made us different from capitalist society, which suffered from permanent crises and stagnation.

Under Khrushchev – whom I include among our most inept leaders and who was second only to Gorbachev in his stupidity – they created a program for building communism in the Soviet Union within twenty years – that is, by the early 1980's. I recall clearly how this program was received, since at that time I had just taken up my post in the Communist Party Central Committee. My first impression of this program was on the whole positive and optimistic. Along with many others, I didn't see all its flaws at the time. Only later did I begin to understand that this program was essentially Stalinist in its calls for increasing production above past achievements. Stalin said that if

we were to attain a high level of steel production, then this should be equated with the building of communism in our country. And everyone believed it.

O.S. But maybe this approach was valid only under certain historical conditions. And yet the situation was changing.

V.B. That's right, it was changing. But it was precisely these old forms and methods of economic development that were at the heart of Khrushchev's program for developing the Soviet Union over the next twenty years.

What then was the guiding principle of Khrushchev, this semi-literate man? The sectors in our economy with the greatest potential were identified: oil, coal, steel, cement, fertilizer, grain, meat, etc. This program was proposed by our economists, who said that the United States went through periodic recessions and that its economic development was cyclical. According to their calculations, which were based on the previous average statistical growth rates for the American economy in the 1980s, the United States would be at a certain point of development. And the Soviet Union, with its planned economy, would be able to catch up with the United States at this point and even surpass it. Khrushchev announced that we would quickly catch up to and surpass the United States.

O.S. Did Khrushchev think that our system had limitless resources?

V.B. I think so. But the main thing was that Khrushchev focused on this plan of development.

O.S. I understand our intentions. But consider the following problem. Why wasn't consideration given to the fact that, despite the "Iron Curtain," the Soviet Union was still part of the world economy, that cyclical economic crises in the capitalist world

could and did strike the Soviet economy? Remember, for example, that the fall in world oil prices was a severe blow to the Soviet economy. And such problems could happen again, right? Certainly American economic development itself was more difficult to predict than our own.

V.B. Your observation is correct. But I want to stress the fact that if we had had at our helm a truly great leader who could convince the entire party and nation what we needed to do, as was the case during the Great Patriotic War, then we would have achieved everything, regardless of hardships. So when Khrushchev announced at the Twenty-second Party Congress his program for building communism, the delegates gave him a full ten-minute ovation, and no one wanted to sit down. Such was the excitement. We always wanted to catch up to and surpass the United States; everyone wanted a better life.

O.S. Such were the times: the first satellite, Gagarin's flight in space.

V.B. There was excitement in the air. I can say of myself that I was in a state of euphoria. I felt, as did millions of our citizens, that the country was headed upwards. Huge strategic problems were being worked out. We were ahead of everyone in space exploration.

O.S. But social issues were being worked out as well, and living conditions were improving. Remember the so-called Khrushchev buildings. At that time, the construction of residential buildings was a big boon for people.

V.B. After Khrushchev left the political scene, Brezhnev did not disrupt the economic model or program, although he could have done so. Brezhnev did not start

saying that the program was a risky undertaking. By the mid-'70s Brezhnev started to understand that everything was more complicated.

O.S. So Brezhnev followed the course charted by Khrushchev?

V.B. Brezhnev became a slave to this system.

O.S. And what about Kosygin's reforms and Lieberman's views?

V.B. Lieberman started to sound the alarm as far back as the early 1960s. He understood the essence of economic growth. Khrushchev's development plan included natural economic products. Lieberman looked at the problem of economic development from the point of view of efficiency. And a completely different picture opened up before him than the one imagined by our leaders. I remember perfectly Lieberman's notes on economic issues. He wrote on many occasions that we needed corrective measures in our development plans. Were corrective measures of any kind possible at that time? No. That much is certain. Khrushchev was a stubborn person and could break any sensible point of view in half and shoot down any notion that didn't appeal to him. Remember his idea of genuine voluntarism in agriculture. He eliminated personal supplementary holdings. He transferred the latest agricultural technology to poorly developed state and collective farms, and in so doing he virtually destroyed this technology.

O.S. I read that during the massive corn harvests there were even incidents where corn was specially grown along a road where Khrushchev was supposed to pass so as to hide the ordinary wheat and rye fields.

V.B. In that connection, let me tell you the following incident. There was an academician named Vavilov (no relation to the famous Vavilov). For a short time he headed the Lenin All-Union Academy of Agricultural Sciences. Vavilov worked in the Komi Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. At that time there was a famous photograph published in *Village Life* magazine that caught the attention of Khrushchev himself. Academician Vavilov was in the photo with outstretched arms trying with great difficulty to reach a panicle of corn. Another academician – Muromtsev, a good friend of mine – showed me the uncropped photo. It was clear from the photo that Vavilov was actually sitting Uzbek style reaching for the corn. That's one more telling feature of the Khrushchev era. So, for the most part, Khrushchev himself made all the stupid economic blunders.

O.S. And was it difficult to find a way out of these stupid actions?

V.B. We could extricate ourselves from this situation only by making a decisive break from Khrushchev's plans for the country's economic development.

O.S. Could Brezhnev have done what was necessary?

V.B. In theory he could have. But in the 1970s, because of his health, he personally couldn't take on too active a role.

O.S. What about in the 1960s? Why couldn't we change the direction of the country's development at that time?

V.B. In 1965 there was a March plenum of the Communist Party Central Committee that did more for our economy than all the postwar measures of Stalin and Khrushchev. People got their personal supplemental holdings back, and cost accounting

was introduced. This plenum really allowed for a strong surge in our economy. But it didn't continue for long. When Shik appeared, events in the Chechen Soviet Socialist Republic drew our troops into that country. In the mid-1980s, when Gorbachev was already general secretary, a former aide to Brezhnev, Golikov, told me something to the effect of, "Do you remember what all those reforms of the second half of the 1960s led to? They led to an explosion and counterrevolution." And many in the Soviet leadership became convinced that this was so. So eventually all the reforms in the Soviet Union were for naught. In the 1970s Brezhnev was seriously ill, and Kosygin was afraid to stir up trouble.

So the economic strategy based on Khrushchev's plans continued. The year 1980 arrived. I was working at *Pravda* at the time. And in 1980 we had an economic situation in which a majority of sectors identified by Khrushchev had gotten very close to those of the Americans, and by some indicators we had even surpassed them. You could say that we virtually fulfilled the program announced at the Twenty-Second Party Congress. But it turned out that the United States was nowhere near the point of development that we had expected. The United States had pursued a qualitatively different course of development. The Americans had cut production of steel, fertilizer, oil, coal, etc., while increasing the scope of their machinery construction, especially precision tools. Electronics and aerospace made tremendous progress in the United States. In other words, the United States was experiencing a genuine technological revolution.

In the 1980s the Soviet Union was a powerful state that possessed a huge material and technological base and all types of resources. The slowdown in growth was

connected to the extraordinarily broad quantity of production. But it should also be noted that the weakness of Brezhnev's leadership in the late 1970s led to a slackening of discipline and an increase in drunkenness. People started working less efficiently. This was a crucial factor.

When I worked at *Pravda*, I always focused on the economy and was well connected with our leading economists. I organized special seminars at *Pravda* at which Zaslavskaiia, Aganbegyan, Kosov, Anchishkin, and others spoke. Patolichev – the minister of foreign trade – and Baibakov – the chairman of Gosplan – would also come. I wanted journalists of the country's leading paper to have a thorough understanding of the state of the Soviet economy. I myself also taught economics courses in Gosplan. And often on exams the people at Gosplan were willing, instead of answering the question handed to them, in exchange for a grade of 4 out of 5, to tell me a lot of interesting things about the secrets and shortcomings of their department. I filled entire notebooks on Soviet economic problems and had solid and, more importantly, objective information about our economy. So I had a good idea about the economic situation in the Soviet Union in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

O.S. And what should we have done to get out of that complicated situation?

V.B. When I came to work with Gorbachev in 1981, one of my first tasks, aside from establishing relations with him, was to communicate to him that it would be better to refocus our capabilities on increased efficiency. This was despite the fact that we could, given our resources and state structure, maintain a rather high level of development according to our existing model.

O.S. Could we really have continued to develop for, say, ten or twenty years following the old model?

V.B. Yes, we could have. But more and more resources were needed for defense requirements in connection with the war in Afghanistan. The military took not only what they needed, but also sometimes more than they needed, and even everything there was. This was the “1941 syndrome”: “just in case”. I remember well the following example, when I was still working with Ustinov. The designers – Korolev, Chelomei, and Yangel – came to him with their plans. One type of missile used solid fuel, the other liquid fuel; the parameters for thrust and range were similar. So the army says it likes these missiles in all their configurations.

O.S. And a decision was being made to create a few types of missiles immediately?

V.B. Yes.

Boldin: I’d like to say a few words about this topic. I agree with Valery Ivanovich about the “1941 syndrome.” In terms of the missiles, yes, there were such precedents, but they were justified. And Ustinov, for the sake of competition, supported various schools of missile construction. There were two cases when two missiles that were analogous in their features were launched.

O.S. That is, there were allocations set aside for the creation of both types of missiles?

O.B. Not quite. Before full-scale allocations were made, a model was built. And at this stage, as a rule, the proposal that was regarded as the best received financing.

And, I emphasize that only very rarely – a total of two times and under pressure from the designers from competing schools – was it decided to carry out a comparative test, which required huge expenditures.

O.S. But this is a normal process. Was the principle of reasonable sufficiency observed or not?

O.B. Yes, it was observed. In only two cases were two analogous types of missiles made combat ready. But this was done in connection with the critical need of making as many missiles as possible combat ready. After all, we lagged behind the United States and needed parity in order to achieve a more or less equal status with the Americans. Without parity there would not have been those famous treaties of the 1970s. I already spoke with you about this in a previous conversation, Oleg. We were happy at the time to have any new missile that could be made combat ready, as long as we got it “today,” “now.” We had no use for the best if we had to wait until “tomorrow.” You can’t understand the point of our efforts, the spirit of this era, without understanding this. Thanks to Ustinov, we have two types of systems: one employing solid-fuel engines, the other liquid fuel engines. The United States developed only solid-fuel engines.

Speaking of military expenditures, we have to mention the many myths about excessive outlays. Even Gorbachev was influenced by data that was given to him by the executive committee of the Academy of Sciences, and by Arbatov, Shatalin, and others. These data about our expenditures were a lie. I once gave a speech about this and noted that our military expenditures were 8 to 12 percent of GNP. I can exclude 3 percent of the resources, but no more. You can’t forget that, in terms of defense, freedom is

expensive. Therefore, we had to work efficiently and not thoughtlessly reduce our military capabilities.

O.S. Who always initiated increases in defense spending, the army, the Military Industrial Complex, or our leaders themselves?

O.B. Decision-making was a complex process. The Military Industrial Commission, the Department of Defense of the Central Committee, and the Academy of Sciences were the core decision-making bodies. All questions connected to defense spending were examined collectively. I believe that all our defense programs were well founded and don't see any big errors or miscalculations. The defense industry worked very efficiently and did not experience a period of stagnation. And I would often tell this to Gorbachev during our discussions.

V.B. Speaking of reasonable sufficiency, I think we needed to have mobile troops and powerful strategic forces. I thought we had a surplus of tanks and several other types of conventional weapons in the 1980s. I favored supporting our Military Industrial Complex and I helped its effective development in whatever way I could. For example, I sought to provide as much assistance as possible to the Buran project.

O.B. Yes, Valery Ivanovich helped me a lot on this issue.

Understand that the economy was inefficient in other areas, the exception being the Military Industrial Complex.

V.B. The question of defense spending was important for us, since defense required substantial allocations. Although there were other sectors of the economy where

we spent large sums with even less effect. Agriculture, for example. I know only too well how many mistakes were made during the development of agriculture.

But let's get back to the situation in the mid-1980s. You could say with certainty that there were no objective causes for the collapse of the Soviet Union. But in 1985 there was a lot that had to be corrected, changed, and improved. So when I came to Gorbachev in 1981, I brought with me a whole team of specialists in economics that tried to provide a detailed explanation of the real economic situation in the Soviet Union. Gorbachev knew agriculture fairly well but was completely unprepared for work at the macroeconomic level on the scale of the entire Soviet economy. Gorbachev's personality played a particular role in his perception of the Soviet Union's domestic problems.

O.S. Could you speak in more detail about Gorbachev's personality. How did it change? You worked closely with him for almost ten years.

V.B. Gorbachev is a weak-willed, proud, and unstable person. To be honest, I understood this myself rather late. I understood how weak he was only after hearing what people from Gorbachev's own region of Stavropol said about him. People such as Murakhovsky, Taranov, and others told me a lot of interesting things about his personality. They provided examples of how Gorbachev often changed his position and was too pliant. After joining the Central Committee, Gorbachev didn't change. He never wanted to say anything firm to anyone, to make any reproach or exhibit the toughness required by a particular situation. The following example is typical of how Gorbachev conducted himself. One time he called for me and said, "Tell Ryzhkov that he was wrong in settling such and such a question and that everything needed to be done

differently.” I was taken aback by the order and said, “How can I tell Ryzhkov that he’s wrong. I don’t know what this issue is all about and don’t understand it. I’ll tell him. But he’ll say that there was already agreement about doing certain things, and you are telling me now that everything is wrong.” Gorbachev says to me, “Don’t worry, Ryzhkov will understand everything.” That happened many times, and people who worked with him in fact didn’t understand Gorbachev didn’t want to say anything himself about changing his position. Gorbachev, while looking you straight in the eyes, would refuse to do what he had already promised. His mode of behavior is reminiscent of how a capitalist economy develops: first it rises, then falls, then experiences stagnation. Working with Gorbachev was very difficult. I was never sure that what I was working on at a given moment would not get a negative evaluation from Gorbachev the next day. Everything could be turned on its head on a daily or hourly basis.

You are familiar with the story involving Yakovlev. I wrote about it in my book. Gorbachev ordered Kryuchkov and me to ask Yakovlev about his connections to American intelligence. I tried to object that it wasn’t worth it for me to be present at this meeting, since I didn’t know the details of the matter. Wasn’t it possible to ask Yakovlev himself about this directly? Nothing could be sillier. I said to Kryuchkov personally that I couldn’t shed any light on the Yakovlev affair. But Kryuchkov said to me that this was Gorbachev’s order and that the two of us must “disembowel” Yakovlev. I suggested that Gorbachev meet with Yakovlev himself. What if we were to find out that the information about Yakovlev was a myth? Then it would be possible for Yakovlev to save face. But Gorbachev was adamant: “I told you everything you are to do with Kryuchkov.” Our

meeting with Yakovlev took place at a bathhouse in Yasenevo, where Kryuchkov had invited him. When we got to the most important part of the conversation, I went out to the steam room, according to the plan that Kryuchkov and I had agreed on ahead of time. When I returned to the dressing room, I heard loud voices – they were speaking with each other in a really abusive manner.

O.S. In your book, *The Fall of the Pedestal*, you write that Kryuchkov was nominated as KGB chairman in the fall of 1988, on the recommendation of Yakovlev (p. 238?). Is that true?

V.B. Yes. I can confirm that that's the way it happened. Maybe Yakovlev's recommendation was not the only one. Incidentally, as far as I know, Gorbachev heard from Andropov that Kryuchkov was a "thoughtful and reliable person." In general, Yakovlev would often say that he even recommended those whom he not only hadn't actually recommended, but had even tried to eliminate. But as soon as someone obtained a high-level appointment, Yakovlev would say to him immediately: "I was the one who recommended you." It was Yakovlev who introduced me to Kryuchkov long before Kryuchkov became chairman of the KGB. The details of Kryuchkov's appointment are not entirely clear. Only Gorbachev himself can clear things up, explaining why he ended up choosing Kryuchkov.

O.S. But let's return to Kryuchkov's conversation with Yakovlev. You mentioned that during the conversation they were speaking abusively with at each other. How did it end?

V.B. They weren't really speaking abusively, but were having a heated conversation, and Yakovlev's basic reproach to Kryuchkov was that foreign intelligence worked inefficiently and mainly looked after its own. Certain examples were cited. But Vladimir Aleksandrovich didn't agree with these arguments, emphasizing that Yakovlev didn't know everything. In any case, that evening, when this conversation took place, they drank a lot, which at that time was unusual for Yakovlev, because he was either getting ready for his gall-bladder operation or had just had it. In any case, they had a serious talk then. That's what happened.

O.S. However, in connection with this problem there is still one question that concerns Gorbachev's personal qualities. One point of view testifies to his weakness as a person. The fact that Gorbachev and other Soviet leaders who came to power in the '80s were weak personalities, and their lack of preparedness for the bitter fight with the Americans – was this a typical trend?

V.B. On three occasions Gorbachev carried out personnel changes in the Politburo, the Central Committee, and the government. And in this regard I must say that each time, people of weak character joined the Politburo and the Central Committee. You be the judge. Once Gorbachev said that we were being criticized because the membership of the Central Committee was rather old and that about one hundred people from the Central Committee should be retired voluntarily. A very difficult operation was carried out. At first ten members of the Central Committee and Secretariat were called up, among them Zimyanin. They said to him: "Mikhail Vasilievich! You understand that society, the party, and its entire leadership structure are undergoing a process of renewal.

We are being criticized harshly today. So we have a proposal for bringing in new people to the Central Committee staff. And to accomplish this, we have to free up seats occupied by our oldest comrades.” But what is meant by “old”? There were Central Committee members who were ministers. Zimyanin was no longer a Central Committee secretary and didn’t occupy any other post. He was retired. Zimyanin said to this proposal, “I understand that everything has a proper time, so I won’t object.” And they tell him, “Mikhail Vasilievich, the problem is not that you aren’t going to object. In light of your high authority, we would like you to be the initiator and encourage others to follow your example of voluntary retirement.” And, to our shame, Zimyanin agreed.

Invitations were issued to a second group of people; Zimyanin sought to persuade them that the country was in a difficult situation and that new personnel had to be brought in without delay. Some of those invited asked about special clinics and other benefits. Gorbachev assured them that that they would keep all their benefits. At the same time someone circulated a paper that said that Central Committee members, believing that the party should bring in new personnel in connection with the accelerated pace of life, decided to leave the Central Committee, opening the way to younger personnel.

That was the first stage. Then came the second stage, in which Dolgikh played a particular role. He was also retired but remained on the Central Committee. It’s possible that he was one of the first to sign the request to leave the Central Committee. I didn’t expect him to do something like that. I, for one, wouldn’t have signed anything, especially if it had come from Gorbachev. The thing is that each of these people

worshipped the party. If the party had said to them, "Go jump off the Crimea Bridge," I think most of these people would have followed such an order.

New people replaced them. But the tragedy was that these new people turned out to be a hundred times less manageable than the old people. The old staff (Zimyanin again, who started working back under Stalin after the Nineteenth Party Congress) knew what discipline and order and party decisions were. They knew in the end what fear was. Although in this case, fear was not the most important thing. The younger generation didn't know fear. It didn't remember 1937. The majority of them were born in the '50s. They can be compared to those who lost loved ones, arms, and legs in the war. I remember how representatives of the war generation gave speeches at Party meetings. They ruffled the feathers of our bosses and leaders. Even Stalin was afraid of them. He was afraid of the Party in general, because if he became the subject of a serious the party discussion, he would have caught it, too. Stalin had no way of fighting against these people.

O.B. I remember 1952. At that time I was a Young Communist. Party meetings lasted two to three days each. They dragged on starting from 4 or 5 p.m. and continued until 11 or 12 o'clock midnight. A break was announced, and on the next day the meeting continued. The disputes at those meetings were heated, and the arguments touched upon questions of principle.

O.S. But under Gorbachev the sessions also lasted several hours. He kept people for hours.

V.B. It was Gorbachev who kept them, whereas back then the communists themselves didn't want to break up.

O.B. Back then the atmosphere was completely different: people said what they were thinking.

O.S. So the new people who arrived in the late '80s turned out to be more resolute than Gorbachev, who would say, "One more change like that and it will be impossible to deal with the Central Committee." A paradoxical situation. On the one hand we were rather soft with the Americans; on the other hand, the new people in the leadership were more resolute by nature. What was more prominent?

V.B. People who were more involved with practical work came to the Central Committee. They didn't have extensive experience on staff as secretaries of oblast committees, regional committees, etc. This was a team of party members who had grown up quickly. And they came with the awareness that Gorbachev didn't do what they believed he needed to do. And the most important thing is they didn't fear Gorbachev. If the old guard, experienced and wise, approached events with caution and forethought, then the new generation did not know fear and went on the offensive with great vigor. And the first plenums with the new Central Committee demonstrated that Gorbachev would be shown no quarter.

I remember how he called me once (he always needed an audience). He was sitting behind his desk, then jumped up and started pacing and saying, "Did you see who we selected? If we get that kind of group in here again, they'll kick us all out!" He was afraid of these people. But he found a way to fight them. It was a simple but clever

method. Gorbachev would gather the Central Committee members together on the eve of a plenum in the conference hall and say, "Tomorrow, comrades, we are convoking a plenum. We're going to ask serious questions. But I'm concerned that we won't be able to let everyone speak. And I'd like to hear each of your opinions because we are counting on you. Thus, I ask that you give a speech right now and say openly everything you think about the current situation."

They stand and start to offer criticism. They resorted to profanity. When they said unpleasant things to Gorbachev, he would interrupt them, saying, "Wait a minute. What did you say? Let me write it down." A true actor.

O.B. He had another method. Gorbachev would ask Central Committee secretaries to gather together members of the Central Committee under their supervision. I remember gathering the delegates who had arrived and hearing them out.

V.B. So everyone gave a speech and spoke until they were exhausted. Things gradually became more relaxed. On the next day the plenum convened. Gorbachev opened it, outlined the issues, and said, "You know that we already met yesterday with some of the Central Committee members. They raised some points. They can repeat them. But the floor is open to those who didn't get a chance to speak or to those who would like to make another speech."

After the previous difficult day, committee members were exhausted by the harsh speeches. As a result, there was no desire to return to what had been said. And whoever had a desire to speak, did so in an entirely different manner. When in the end some

decision was made, no one cared. Everyone was tired. Tired mainly not of talking and sitting, but of the fact that they had been duped.

O.S. But later didn't they see through this tactic?

V.B. They saw through it, but this tactic was employed all of two times. For someone who knew what was going on it was enough to hear Gorbachev's introductory words about the purpose of the preliminary meeting. As a result, the stenogram of the plenum had an anonymous character. That's what the decisions were like.

O.S. Indeed, the decisions made at that time didn't reflect the struggle that was going on in the party and the government. You'd think that there wasn't a conservative wing in the country capable of countering Gorbachev's policy, or that there weren't those forces seeking to draw him over to their side. And at the same time, it's clear from what you're saying that a new Central Committee had replaced the old one, that this new one criticized Gorbachev sharply, and that Gorbachev was afraid of it. Isn't there a contradiction here?

V.B. First of all, I'd like to follow through to the end the line of reasoning with which we started this conversation. We were talking about how by 1985 a certain amount of negative energy had built up. This problem had to be solved somehow. The situation was not disastrous. It could have been handled, even by the banal and simplistic methods used by Andropov: bringing order to the country, forcing people to work, repealing the ill-conceived anti-alcohol law. Gradual steps could then be taken to improve efficiency.

We had to reject something. I remember one proposal that Maslyukov and I worked on. Then Volsky and several others joined us. The proposal consisted of finding several “points of growth” in the conditions that prevailed. What does this mean? If, for example, you were to represent graphically American economic growth in the '70s and '80s, it would be obvious that coal extraction was reduced. By contrast, space-related production increased. The latter was like a steamship that carried with it the whole economy, driving advances in science and technology. For example, while we were building insignificant things, such as the Don combine, the modernization of four hundred machine tool plants was initiated. These were plants that made spare parts, rubber, gaskets, air conditioners, and much more.

And Oleg Dmitrievich could say that up to two thousand different enterprises were modernized for the sake of his innovation, even if just a single new unit was produced. This is where the breakthrough in more promising directions comes from. The most important thing is that the foundation was being laid for improvements in efficiency.

O.B. Incidentally, there were people in the newly configured Central Committee who understood in its entirety the flawed character of Gorbachev's policy. But there were also people who supported him. And this gave Gorbachev room for maneuvering and upsetting the whole system. People born after the war came on the scene. They hadn't seen and hadn't known the horrors of fascism, the hardships of postwar reconstruction.

V.B. That's absolutely correct, Oleg Dmitrievich. Later, when almost half of the Central Committee members wanted to remove Gorbachev from his post as general secretary, he was able to secure the support of certain people...

O.B. ...who ran to sign papers in his defense.

V.B. ...and weak people from the Politburo who could settle this question as a matter of principle. Ryzhkov and Ligachev would have gotten up and said, "Enough!"

O.B. That's the first point. The second concerns the "points of growth." The problem is that every finished product goes through several so-called transformations. The more complex the product, the more transformations there are. In order to build the Buran-Energia system, we were forced to create close to eighty-five new materials of a higher caliber than anything else in industry and engineering. I add this only in support of what Valery Ivanovich has said. And when I am asked, "But why did we make Energia and Buran at all?" my answer is, "In order to achieve technological advances." We introduced something on the order of six hundred innovations. Soros recently bought these up on the cheap.

V.B. As soon as Gorbachev came to power, the question of improving the economy's efficiency became very acute, as did, consequently, a series of issues that would have allowed for the more effective allocation of capital investments and for solving problems related to social welfare. It was at this time that I made a proposal based on American growth parameters. I was finishing up graduate work in the Academy of Social Sciences of Central Committee and studying the world economy. I was familiar with publications of limited access as well as those that were readily available. My

dissertation concerned the question of scientific and technical progress. That's why I was pretty familiar with this area and why I understood it. And so those were the kinds of growth areas that I proposed.

O.S. And did you explain this to Gorbachev?

V.B. Yes, I explained it to Gorbachev and showed it to him in its present form. He also found it interesting. But, unfortunately, the leaders of the economy weren't interested. They viewed the country's possibilities from the perspective of Gosplan and probably didn't want to acknowledge that they had established a methodology that led to a dead end. This methodology, as I already said, was set up essentially in the prewar years, when we were extricating ourselves from poverty and backwardness. At that time we needed metal to build electric power stations, increase tractor construction, and build tanks and artillery systems.

O.S. Why were the leaders of the economy opposed?

V.B. I can't say that they were vehemently opposed.

O.S. To put it more mildly, they didn't understand.

V.B. Exactly. At any rate, they did a lot of talking, but they didn't offer any solutions. I couldn't even offer any solutions because capital investment was in their hands. And then, what is a "point of growth"? Let's assume that electronics is one. So we began developing electronics technology in a very deliberate manner, though we had a late start. But here the question was that we were being hampered by our lack of experience outside the Soviet Union, by the fact that we had not entered the world market. Only with respect to natural resources had we entered the world market. In

essence, we didn't have the competence we needed. "Silicon Valley" in the United States is well known. This was where all the latest computer technology was produced; this was the worldwide source of microchips. And we languished in our own backyard for the simple reason that in our case electronic devices were largely used for defense, and defense was a closed area. To the last day every one of our plants had defense shops that made parts for missiles. I used to go to the plants and see how everything was made. I was in Zelenograd, the center of mass production in that oblast. They made some things for our national market and even for countries in the COMECON. And they were just not up to world standards. We were always behind, even though we had some brilliant minds. We were preparing to catch up to America, and very quickly. And, as always happens in a big country when there is an opportunity to concentrate efforts in a certain area, we could overcome anything. And we started to build a second Zelenograd next to the first one, and in this second one there was going to be suitable equipment based on the parts made in Zelenograd-1. Bridges and underpasses were constructed there and residential housing went up. In other words, Zelenograd should have turned into a huge computer city.

O.S. I would add to your words what Ligachev said to me, that is, that 200 billion rubles was allocated for restructuring and this money was earmarked for the latest technology, capital renewal, and machine construction. And an additional seventy billion rubles was to be used for modernizing foodstuffs, light industry, and agriculture. So there was an economic plan for perestroika.

V.B. The plan, however, did not take everything into consideration. And then 200 billion rubles wasn't enough. You and I talked only about one dimension of the problem. But you can't stand firm on the basis of one dimension because there was still the aerospace industry. So 200 billion rubles was clearly not enough.

O.S. But a plan for *perestroika* was nonetheless formulated?

V.B. More accurately, it only started to be formulated. But it wasn't realized for the simple reason that the real economy by that time started to falter. Growth rates slid to a minimum.

O.S. What do you think of the idea that in the period 1986-88 the Soviet economy was flourishing?

V.B. "Flourishing" is too strong a word. But there was an upsurge. *Perestroika* had still not started at that time. But you could sense the effect of the new leadership. Look how every change in government gives people hope and allows for a spurt in various areas of life. Remember that in the final years of Khrushchev's rule growth rates fell steadily. They were lower than in Stalin's time and were falling all the time. Then Brezhnev came to power, and there was a surge. The five-year plan of 1966-70 surpassed in scale everything we did earlier. People were tired of Khrushchev. I have a very clear image of this man. I'm ashamed to say this about our leadership, but Khrushchev was rather thickheaded. Although at the same time he was a unique person, and there were areas where, of course, he made progress. But he didn't have a complete grasp of what was going on. And, what's most important, Khrushchev was moody and disorganized.

He set the world on the verge of war three times. Moreover, he did it when we didn't even enjoy parity with the United States.

So Gorbachev's arrival facilitated the economic boom in the country. A young, pleasant leader. Of course, the people were hopeful. I think that 95 percent of the economic boom of the second half of the 1980s was due to psychological factors, a kind of hope. I don't exclude the possibility that if someone like Stalin had come to power at that time, the growth rates would have been even greater. Everything depended on how diligently people worked, on their awareness of the need to work. Brezhnev himself didn't work and those around him didn't work, and everyone else, as a result, didn't want to work. So we experienced a labor shortage. It may have seemed like there were a lot of people, but for some reason we restricted ourselves to a limited number of itinerant workers.

In Moscow alone there were as many as 800,000 itinerant workers! And most of those supposedly went to the Likhachev plant and to the Lenin Komsomol Automobile Plant. But the workers also went from these factories to other enterprises where they immediately received higher wages and a place to live.

The economic program of *perestroika* was formulated only as a rough draft, because it concerned mainly short-term actions rather than the distant future.

O.S. But a program was in fact formulated. There was Ryzhkov's commission, which attracted many notable economists. The effect of Gorbachev's coming to power turned out to be too short-lived; it lasted no more than a year. The effect was seriously undermined by the anti-alcohol law. That was a fatal mistake.

O.S. Was it carried out under Ligachev's and Solomentsev's influence?

V.B. No. It was Gorbachev's idea. But he entrusted its implementation to Ligachev and Solomontsev. These were people who since Stalin's time had been saying, "It's got to get done, so we'll do it!" And they did, using any method necessary. I remember how they insisted not on merely implementing the anti-alcohol program, but on over-fulfilling the plan. Workers from Gosplan said that one quarter of the country's budget relied on alcohol sales. A program was outlined that brought to a halt the production of strong wines, vodka, and cheap wines. But the production of cognac and dry wine continued. Later this was eliminated. Dry wine became scarce. Or we had dry wine that was manufactured from table grapes. What are table grapes? Grapes with higher sugar content. You can't make good wine from them.

All local budgets relied on vodka, and when difficulties in paying doctors and teachers arose in some oblast, the secretary of the oblast committee would go to Gosplan and request that a small plant to be built for the manufacture of alcoholic products.

I wouldn't have started cutting alcohol production at such a rate. Those people from Gosplan who objected to the anti-alcohol campaign would say, "What is more valuable to you, the health of the nation and our future generations, or a line item in the budget?" And the health of the nation turned out to be more valuable. But this problem couldn't be settled by such methods, because as soon as cuts of more than 20 percent were made in alcohol production, the whole campaign suffered a fatal blow. Some proposed even greater cuts. Lines for alcoholic beverages started getting longer. Shortages grew. Then the emergency delivery of winemaking materials from Algeria

began. They were transported in tankers. We had wine now, but it was cheap wine. The quality of spirits remained low, even if the Armenians put labels on the bottles with three stars and called the final product “Ararat.”

This policy led to a general enmity toward the leadership and most of all toward Gorbachev, even though he pinned all the responsibility on Ligachev, despite the fact that the latter’s duties included only implementation of Central Committee decisions. But Solomentsev, who in his day was no light drinker, called everyone to a party commission and kicked them out of the party.

Gorbachev and those around him wanted to deceive the nation by cutting the production of wine and winemaking materials. Incidentally, Gorbachev’s wife, Raisa, was opposed to the anti-alcohol campaign. She came to me many times and said, “How can they ban dry wine? Does that mean I can’t drink Mukuzani?” She and I were in agreement and would often order a bottle of red wine on plane trips. Gorbachev turned away when this happened, pretending that he didn’t notice.

But you can’t fool the people. They started to distill sugar and make moonshine. The result was a terrible shortage of sugar. Then we started to increase purchases of sugar from Cuba and wherever else possible. There was nothing in Ukraine, which used to be a supplier of sugar beets. I remember how they used to be shipped in a case together with equipment for making moonshine. Creative people can find a way out of any situation. In addition, the black market took over, especially since authorities turned a blind eye to it. To top it off, at this time, beginning about 1987, growth rates started to fall.

The trouble is that Gorbachev didn't feel like thinking about the priority areas for economic development that we talked about. He was in an uncomfortable position. He felt that the fire would flare up under him. At the end of 1986 and beginning of 1987, Gorbachev, fearing that the economy was on the skids, lost control of the situation.

Gorbachev always had a weak understanding of economics. But in the party he didn't have to know economics because the system had been fine-tuned. There was a mechanism already in place. By this time, however, some of the fundamental pillars on which the economy rested had been destabilized. Lines were getting longer, people started to become agitated. Yeltsin, of course, played a certain negative role in all this.

So, already in 1987 Gorbachev found himself in a difficult position. His popularity started to fall. I remember when the paper *Moskovskaia pravda* did a superficial analysis of his ratings, it turned out the Gorbachev's popularity was on a downward spiral. After this *Argumenty i fakty* joined the chorus. This enraged Gorbachev so much that he was prepared to act, to fire Starkov, the editor-in-chief of *Argumenty i fakty*. But since Gorbachev is a coward by nature, in the end he didn't do anything. Instead he tried to smooth things out. In addition, the entire press swarmed down on him. And it was in the middle of all this that Gorbachev introduced *glasnost*. So the fall in Gorbachev's popularity – and Gorbachev was associated with the anti-alcohol campaign – was one of the factors that led to *glasnost*.

Gorbachev was perplexed. He was on a mission. He was looking for a miraculous and swift resolution of the problems that had developed. As I have observed, many of our leaders look for some kind of miracle when they get into a difficult situation.

Take, for example, Khrushchev, who at first looked for a miracle in corn. When experience proved him wrong, Khrushchev looked for the causes of his failure in the lack of scientific method in agriculture. Then came the charlatan Lysenko. But that's not all. The idea was put forth that if grain for sowing was soaked in the urine of pregnant mares, then the harvest would increase three to four times. Some journalists, in particular from *Komsomolskaia pravda*, went to Kuban to try out this method. There were several publications, such as *Farm Life*, that dedicated whole columns to the subject. When this supposed innovation came to naught, there was talk of multi-branched wheat.

The whole world developed a system of fertilizers and pesticides formulated methods for cultivating the soil, and built storage and processing facilities. We looked for a simple panacea.

Gorbachev, too, sought a miracle. He decided to find that miracle somewhere else. In order to divert the nation from the mistakes and failures that happened on his watch, he declared that the economy would never grow unless we started on the road to democracy. As soon as he started talking about democratization, everyone immediately forgot about production, about the plans that had been outlined, and rushed toward democracy, not knowing what democracy or production was.

O.S. What can you say about the Politburo's decision in 1987 to introduce sharp cuts in government orders?

V.B. This decision was not thought out. Not thought out, not organized, not backed by anything. That's why it didn't have the expected positive result.

Then began the era of disorder and instability. New parties, large and small, appeared. Obolenskys and other shady characters who aspired to the presidency. There were some organizations in Moscow that provided money to have rows of automobiles circle the Kremlin in protest against the authorities. They were free to rock the boat. Then came a period of chaos and complete unpredictability.

Everyone sensed the power that Gorbachev was losing. He cast about for something to hang onto. I saw how he latched on to one thing, then to another. He couldn't make sense of what was happening in a logical manner, and so he couldn't settle any problems. He started to replace people and gave several members of the Politburo the same assignments. For example, Ligachev was responsible for agriculture, which Nikonov oversaw at the same time; the latter also dealt with ideology, which Yakovlev, too, supervised. There was a conflict of interests accompanied by Gorbachev's inability to delegate and to demand from each his fair share. It became clear that Gorbachev wasn't suitable for anything and that he was leading the country to an abyss.

Some curious situations arose. I remember Ligachev coming once to Gorbachev and complaining, "I called people together and gave a directive in accordance with what you and I had agreed upon. But Yakovlev gathered together journalists the next day and told them the exact opposite." And Yakovlev told me, "I called together some journalists according to Gorbachev's instructions." There was a complete paralysis of authority. Incidentally, Yakovlev was a little smarter and more clever than Ligachev. Ligachev is an honest, open, and predictable person. But Yakovlev acted on different principles.

There were similar developments in other areas. There were arguments between Ryzhkov and Ligachev, Ryzhkov and Slyunkov, Zaikov and Ligachev. Some people were brought to the point of nervous exhaustion and tears. By that time I saw that government structures were decaying. Although the only body that continued to work as before was the General Department of the Central Committee. Therefore, with the help of the existing bureaucracy, I held all the party's structures in my hands, including the newly formed Communist Party of the Russian Federation. Because we continued to receive documents that had been clearly worked out. But when I left to work in the administration of the president of the Soviet Union, I could no longer play my former role in the party. But Gorbachev, who focused his attention on presidential duties, immediately lost the party. After losing the party, he was deprived of the levers of power.

O.S. In your book you wrote that, in your opinion, 1988 was a turning point. But you still think that when Gorbachev switched his focus to foreign policy, he started to devote little attention to domestic affairs. This became evident beginning in 1987-88?

O.S. I think foreign policy is a separate topic. For now I'll talk only briefly about it. Gorbachev is a country boy and, unfortunately, not well educated. The fact that he studied law at Moscow State is not significant, since in the course of his work at Stavropol he forgot everything he was taught and later on often asked Lukyanov about certain ideas and formulations of legislation. But as a person from a family that was not highly cultured, he had a big yearning for power.

Gorbachev craved power, latched on to it, and crawled to the top by little steps. When he came to Moscow for plenums and walked around the Hotel Rossia in his free

time, he always complained to his companion, “Why don’t they elect me Secretary of the Central Committee? I mean, look, they’re all getting on in years and don’t understand agriculture. Why don’t they choose me?” Oblast committee secretaries who vacationed in the Stavropol region would say to me, “You come to Mineralnye Vody. Why don’t you invite Gorbachev to sit down and chat. He’s always talking about how he doesn’t have time because he’s so busy.” Gorbachev would not meet with anyone on a level below vice-chairman of the Council of Ministers and a few ministers who were involved with technology issues. He didn’t want to waste his time on the other first secretaries. He tried to cultivate contacts with key figures only, giving them gifts. Raisa always complained that she had to look for very expensive gifts. Sometimes she even had to send someone off to a neighboring republic to get them, spending large amounts of money. When Brezhnev’s daughter Galina went there for vacation, Gorbachev couldn’t find anything better to do than accompany her around personally, treating her to everything.

Simply put, Gorbachev played the role of a true climber. Unfortunately, I realized all of this too late. In general, I realized many things too late. At first I was captivated by his youth and the fact that he was a skilled listener and speaker. But then it wore off.

After the beginning of democratization, which didn’t quite go where Gorbachev had intended, and his blood enemy Yeltsin stood at its helm, he then pinned all his hopes on the West.

O.S. Why didn't Gorbachev just remove Yeltsin completely from the political stage? He virtually gave Yeltsin the opportunity to return to big-time politics.

V.B. Practically everyone told Gorbachev that Yeltsin should not be left in Moscow, especially since Yeltsin had left a pernicious trail in Moscow. He chased out the staff and drove several to suicide. But the most important thing was that when Gorbachev was told about this, he became enraged and accused others of using Stalinist tactics. In the end, he insisted on having his own way.

O.S. Did Gorbachev really not understand that Yeltsin was a strong personality and would never forgive Gorbachev for humiliating him?

V.B. That's the whole point – he didn't understand! Even though he was told by Kryuchkov and others that here was a person capable of only destroying, not creating. And Yeltsin began destroying, being one of the first who raised the question of the center's new status and Russia's sovereignty.

O.S. Was Gorbachev really so naive in the area of political struggle? He, a weathered *apparatchik*?

V.B. You see, by that time, I think, he was no longer as sharp as he had been and he was caught in the maelstrom of international politics. The first thing he did in foreign policy when he ascended the throne offered by Gromyko was to appoint Shevardnadze foreign minister. Gorbachev asked my opinion regarding his candidacy. This was the least likely candidate from the list that I had. There were many diplomats. Dobrynin, by the way, wasn't the best choice. By that time he had grown old and, besides, was in a well-worn rut, having towed the line of both Khrushchev and Brezhnev.

O.S. So then who, in your opinion, was the best candidate?

V.B. Kornienko.

O.S. But he was unacceptable for Gorbachev?

V.B. I would say that Gorbachev considered anyone unacceptable who had his own opinion. He needed a little puppy whom he could tell, "Go to your place! Sit!" etc. When Gorbachev told me that he was thinking about appointing Shevardnadze foreign minister, I was very surprised and asked, "Do we need yet another Georgian? Especially a man who has no experience in diplomacy? If you had decided to appoint him interior minister, this would have made sense." Gorbachev replied by saying that I didn't understand anything, that questions of foreign policy would be primarily in his hands, but that he needs Eduard as an intelligent executor. But that's not the way it goes in diplomacy. Diplomacy is a very subtle profession that demands great knowledge and a high level of sophistication. Shevardnadze, if I'm not mistaken, graduated from veterinary school. For a diplomat this was clearly not enough. Of course, he didn't know any foreign languages, and he didn't even speak Russian very well. That's why there were doubts, but Gorbachev didn't have any. In the end, Shevardnadze's appointment was a shock for diplomats.

O.S. Anatoly Gromyko says that his father, Andrei Andreevich, could not come to his senses for a whole day when he found out about Shevardnadze's appointment.

V.B. But Gromyko could have raised a few questions during Gorbachev's appointment. Anatoly Gromyko is trying to vindicate his father today out of a sense of obligation. But I don't think the time is right today when policy has to be justified

through diplomatic means. It should be said directly and openly that Andrei Andreevich got into a mess with the whole matter. I also have in mind the episode with Gorbachev and the one with Shevardnadze. He was the head of state and could have put many things in order.

O.S. In other words, at that time Gromyko was able to influence Gorbachev?

V.B. Of course. Head of state, Politburo member – Gromyko could have posed the question of Shevardnadze's incompetence. They would have listened to him and supported him.

O.S. Gromyko should probably bear some of the guilt in this whole affair.

V.B. Gromyko's guilt is very great. It is based primarily on the fact that at the end of his life he wanted to climb to the top, even though he no longer had the strength to do so. Perhaps in the area of diplomacy his mind did remain sharp enough, but what Gromyko said at Politburo sessions sometimes provoked bewilderment. When he touched on issues of domestic policy, the only thing he could say was, "When I went on leave, I saw out the window..." He spent his whole life studying one thing. And that's good, it has its advantages. But then why get tangled up in unrelated events?! In a word, Gromyko should have appointed his own successor to the post of foreign minister.

In the area of foreign policy, Gorbachev became engrossed in complex problems he didn't understand. He did a lot of stupid things, starting with his trip to Reykjavik in 1986, where no serious treaties were concluded. Moreover, the American administration saw that it had a partner with whom it could play cat and mouse. They continued to act in the same manner after Bush came to power, and Bush got the better of Gorbachev on

all issues. That's Gorbachev's "peasant upbringing" for you and his desire to become a big-league diplomat.

Gorbachev lost everything. Didn't we have the opportunity to settle with dignity the question of German unification? This is unforgivable. In our time we could have prevented Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic from entering NATO. We could have taken a hard line on the Baltics. Although in the last instance, Yeltsin bears a large share of the guilt.

O.S. As regards foreign policy, was Gorbachev so engrossed in domestic affairs that he could not react in an appropriate manner to what was happening beyond the country's borders?

V.B. No. He wanted to set domestic affairs straight at the expense of foreign affairs. The greatest loss he allowed was in Malta in 1989. He had requested credit many times. He was even allowed to sit in on sessions of the "G-Seven" and was promised many good things. But they weren't about to give him very much, because no one gives a weak personality anything. He wasn't even given sufficient funds for leading a dignified existence, although he "deserved" a large sum of money on behalf of the Soviet Union.

O.S. Yes, the Americans were used to dealing with a strong opponent.

V.B. When the Americans met with approximate parity in the '70s and saw that many kinds of weapons didn't produce a sufficient effect, but that the response would be just as powerful, they moderated their excessive ambitions slightly. Incidentally, we had our proper response to SDI within a few months.

O.S. Why did Gorbachev refuse to budge on SDI? Was he really afraid of it?

V.B. At first the Americans started to frighten him. Then someone from our side also decided to gain some political capital on this. And this happened at a time when SDI couldn't have protected the United States from our most powerful SS-18 missiles if they had been used in accordance with the methods developed by our specialists. Moreover, these methods were efficient and inexpensive.

O.S. I think we touched on many interesting questions today. We'll talk next time about some other questions I have. Thank you very much for this talk.

We approve of the text of this interview

V. I. Boldin

O. D. Baklanov