

## **IMPLOSION OF THE USSR: GEOSTRATEGIC CONSEQUENCES**

ANDRE FONTAINE, *LE MONDE*

At the time of Gorbachev's coming to power, the French-Soviet relations were quite frankly rather bad. The speech by Francois Mitterrand to the Bundestag, on 20 January 1983, was a considerable contribution to defeating the USSR in its battle for the Euromissiles. And when in Moscow, in June 1984, he did not hesitate, despite a clear warning by Zamiatin, to take advantage of the official dinner organized in his honour to praise Sakharov, at that time under house arrest and without telephone. He did not hesitate to ask Theo Klein, president of the Representative Council of the Jewish institutions in France, of whom the least we can say is that he wasn't precisely *persona grata* at the time, to accompany him to visit Lenin's country. What the President of the Republic brought back from this trip was the image of a deeply fossilized society, where nobody dared to take even the slightest initiative. He had witnessed Chernenko's comatose state of health, exhausted by emphysema to the point he could not climb the stairs on his own, and had allowed Gromyko to interrupt him without reacting. He had been particularly struck in hearing Gorbachev, even if joking, say that agricultural problems dated back to 1917.

Gorbachev himself, at that time virtually Chernenko's coadjutor, had confided to the Minister of External Relations, Claude Cheysson, who was seated next to him at the Kremlin banquet, that his turn was coming soon. For years he had charmed the « *red billionaire* » of food-processing, Jean Baptiste Doumeng, who had invited him on various occasions to his estate in the south of France and had lent him a car to let him see for himself what the Western world was like. He kept on repeating that this « Man from the south » with an « indestructible » conviction, that « tried to understand the others...would make the USSR prevail economically and ideologically », once he took control. But if in most cases Kremlinologists in France and elsewhere agreed in considering Mikhail Sergheievitch as the most likely successor of a Secretary General on his last legs, the majority did not see how a genuine reformist could stem from a nomenclature essentially dedicated to the defence of its privileges and to what Jorge Semprun had so nicely defined as « the finicky administration of things that go their way ». Actually, the better one knows a country, the harder it is to think that it might change. Still, in the spring of 1989, Françoise Thom, after having reviewed in her masterpiece « Moment Gorbatchev » the huge upheavals that had been going on for four years in the so-called homeland of socialism, did not try to hide her scepticism vis à vis such events. In consideration of which, colonel Garder had even so announced back in 1965 « the agony of the regime in Soviet Union », Emmanuel Todd in 1976 had predicted the « final collapse », and Hélène d'Encausse did not hesitate to brave the sniggers and dedicate her successful book, in 1978, to the « fragmented empire ».

Mitterrand, a man full of curiosity, had been easily convinced to go to Moscow on 13 March 1985, to attend Tchernenko's funeral. He had come out of the forty five minutes conversation with the new Gensek " immediately seduced and interested " wrote Hubert Védrine, who had accompanied him. He judged him « intelligent, friendly, totally different from the other Soviet managers met », were it for nothing more than his fluent and off the cuff speech. Knowing that "the entry of a new man is rarely sufficient to modify politics built in the course of decades", he admitted that if there had to be a chance for this politics to change, the man who nobody at the time called "Gorby" could be the man to do it.

Even if he had declared to *Le Monde*, in June 1979 that the reunification was neither « desirable nor possible», Mitterrand had affirmed since the beginning of his seven-year term to chancellor Schmidt and then to his successor, Helmut Kohl, both of whom were very sceptical, that it could happen « softly, may be even before the end of the century ... You cannot order it - he had said to Mr. Kohl - but we should start from the principle that whatever is not impossible is therefore possible».

De Gaulle himself had already considered that reunification was unavoidable, but had confided to Kosygin that he was « neither very ardent nor in a hurry ». Pompidou as well. He feared the weight that the GFR could acquire in Europe; this had led him to counterbalance it, to get closer to the United States and USSR and to raise the general's veto to the entry of Great Britain into the EEC. Giscard, who was perfectly in tune with Schmidt, made the best of the *status quo* that seemed to consecrate the Helsinki's agreements, and he had bluntly said to Brezhnev, on a visit he paid him in April 1979, that he wished to keep the division of Germany. All of a sudden the Soviets were doing all they could to avoid Francois Mitterrand's election in 1981. The latter certainly shared the apprehensions of those, as was the case of Maggie Thatcher in the first place, who feared that a unified Germany would dominate the EEC and this is why he wanted to see the reunification and the construction of Europe progress hand in hand. But he was too activist not to rejoice of the progress of liberty, and at the same time too Realpolitiker not to fear that a consolidation, under the effect of the détente, might actually lead to the establishment of a Soviet-American condominium, which Brezhnev had openly proposed to Nixon. And therefore to further diminish France's liberty of action.

When in October 1985, he received the new Gensek, who chose France for his first visit to the West, Mitterrand confided to him that in any case, as far as the issue of the reunification was concerned, his « spirit » was « divided ». But this was not the main topic of the conversation: Gorbachev was obsessed by the IDS Reagan has just launched. The USSR, considering the situation of its finances and the huge delay in information technology development was incapable of finding a way to handle it. He left the president with the image of a man « anxious to succeed economically hence concerned not to be involved in the arms race » relaunched by the White House. Mitterrand thought he would modernize the system, but success wasn't guaranteed.

Less than a year later, Chernobyl, the real starting point of *glasnost*, revealed to the global village the extent of the Soviet disaster. Before returning Gorbachev's visit, in July 1986, the French president briefly met his American counterpart. « The Soviet regime will collapse - he said to him - but not immediately» ...« It will collapse - replied Reagan - I am an unrepentant optimist». Three days later, Mitterrand declared in Moscow, at the end of his talks with the Secretary General, that he had seemed to him as « a man of his time » and that the USSR « feels the need to gather all its strength to dominate the economic crisis». « From now on - wrote Hubert Védrine - he has chosen his camp»: knowing History well enough to be aware that nothing is more difficult for an authoritarian, if not totalitarian Power, as in this case, to successfully achieve the transition towards democracy; he is determined to help as far as possible the Soviet leader to resist the forces that are being mobilized against him.

He will persevere along this line through the end. Accordingly Boris Yeltsin, who clearly was likely to become the first elected president of the Russian republic, was received by the French, in April 1991, on the occasion of his visit to Strasbourg, with a lack of eagerness bordering on churlishness. Mitterrand will be the only one, in the following July, to support the request submitted to the USSR to the G7 for a massive loan, spread over five years, in view of assuring the regime democratic transition and the fast shifting towards the market economy. At the time of Lanaev's putsch, he seems above all concerned to receive the assurance from the conspirators, fearing their success, about the

destiny of Gorbachev, and let's be fair, of Yeltsin. In October he receives, in Latché, Mikhail Gorbachev on his way back from the Madrid conference on the Middle East, and talks to him just as Felipe Gonzales did, which in the opinion of Andrej Gratchev, would "electrify" him, keeping him in the illusion of what is left of his power.

Numerous experts denounce Mitterrand's naiveté, his apparent false step in the affaire of the reunification, like his questionable trip to GDR at the end of 1989, which they explain as his ideological bias. But this is not the point of view of the United States' ambassador, Evan Galbraith. « His economic policy is insane, and I will never understand why he allowed communists to enter his government - he declared to me in front of passing fellow countrymen - But, by God, he's our best ally". By the way, it was by a hairsbreadth that Reagan and the Gensek did not understand each other at the end of 1986, on the occasion of a meeting in Reykjavik on the « zero option», the relinquishing on the part of the two « Superpowers » of the Euromissiles: the agreement came a year later. Across the Atlantic and in Germany enthusiasm prevailed, and the « gorbomania » wind blew. The French opinion was more moderate, worried about the huge obstacles that were piling up, in every field, and to start with in the field of economics, under Gorbachev's leadership. However, as from the collapse of the Wall, there was no more room for passionate debates; the fear of seeing Germany now reunified, trying to dominate the continent again, was mixed with the joy for this giant victory, acquired a hundred years after the storming of the Bastille, with no shedding of blood. Mitterrand who, like Maggie Thatcher, finds it hard to believe that during a given lapse of time the Soviet army would allow the Kremlin to give up the GDR, will obtain a vast support to his policy which consists in supporting the progress of Europe's construction – the Maastricht treaty – and the confirmation of the Oder-Neisse border. In vain Giscard, European member of parliament at the time, insistently asked the GDR to join a real European federation and not the GFR

Mitterrand had something else in mind: not the creation of a federation, but of a European confederation with Russia, without the United States : as a result one could come out of Yalta, as he always demanded. And one would avoid the enlargement of the EEC which could not but decrease the weight of France. But despite his statement to the conference gathered in Prague, in June 1991, in this respect, that his proposal has « the strength of evidence and the boldness of a bet», Vaclav Havel, replied that there was no way to « separate two continents whose civilizations are intertwined» : the peoples of Central Europe have had too much troubles with their powerful neighbours not to appreciate the presence on their territory of the American soldiers. In return for which, the Elysium will find the way, at the peak of the Iraqi crisis, to invent an ephemeral « Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis », that could not do without worrying not only the United States and their British friends, but also the Czechs, the Poles and many others.

The authoritarian drift of the régime, the Chechen affaire, the rampant corruption, the taking over of the media do not give the French public opinion a good image of Russia today and not a single week elapses without hearing one or the other famous intellectual forking out in a indictment of the strange Putin. Which apparently does not stop our officials from co-operating with him : it is true that sometime ago, Bush Jr. had saluted him as a « modern man » of whom he had seen, would you believe it, « the soul » .