



10 DOWNING STREET

LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

6 March 1989 6/3

Prime Minister
 You may find
 this of interest.
 CDP

ms

SOVIET UNION

The department may be interested in a few impressions of what is going on in the Soviet Union gleaned from Andrei Vavilov, one of the Soviet delegates attending the 'Saving the Ozone Layer' Conference. I have known Vavilov for some twenty years. He was in the Embassy in London in the early 1970s and was subsequently one of Brezhnev's interpreters. He is now Deputy Head of the Science and Technology division of the Soviet MFA. He also knows Crispin Tickell.

By Vavilov's account, the Soviet Union was in poor shape. The economic situation was worse than two or three years ago. Entrenched opposition to Gorbachev's reforms was gaining strength. Gorbachev's personal popularity was at its lowest point. His greatest weakness was that he talked too much. People simply could not take him on television any more, they switched off after a while.

Vavilov commented that the Soviet Union did in effect have a party system although it operated under the general umbrella of the Communist party. Gorbachev himself represented the middle of the road group. The hardliners were grouped round Ligachev and Chebrikov. The reformists looked increasingly to Yeltsin. He thought we underestimated Yeltsin, who was far from being a spent force. He would win a landslide in the forthcoming elections. He wanted to do much the same as Gorbachev, but using 'honest' people. Gorbachev's great failure had been in not clearing out relics of the Brezhnev regime at the middle levels. These were people who had done very nicely out of the old system. By withdrawing their co-operation, they were ensuring that the present reforms ran into difficulties.

Vavilov said that one of the biggest problems in the Soviet Union was racketeering. It had now reached monumental proportions, and the reforms had if anything encouraged it. The potential profits even from legitimate activity were considerable. He had a friend who had set himself up in business selling ski articles, who was making 50,000 roubles a month.

Vavilov said that Mrs. Gorbachev remained unpopular. The latest craze in Moscow was wearing buttons with jokes and slogans. Many of these were critical of Mrs. Gorbachev.

Vavilov lamented the difficulty of dealing with the military in the Soviet Union (he was handling arms controls issues in his last job). They became hysterical when you tried to get involved in their affairs. He thought Akhromeyev a great loss. He at least had always been calm and thoughtful.

Vavilov did not think much of his delegation leader at the Conference (the Minister for the Chemical Industry, I think). He had given a very clumsy interview to the press, suggesting that the scientific evidence about damage to the ozone layer was not at all reliable.

He was also disparaging about Zamyatin, who was very much old school. He was unlikely to last long in London, and would be replaced by some-one more in tune with the times.

This all sounds rather negative. But strangely Vavilov seemed quite confident that things would work out. He did not think the clock could be put back in the Soviet Union.

Vavilov went on at some length about the astonishing impact of the Prime Minister's visit to the Soviet Union in 1987. It was still talked about, in particular the way in which she had despatched the journalists in the television interview (I gather that Soviet journalists were not a widely admired breed and three hundred million Russians had long wanted to do to them exactly what the Prime Minister had done). She was far and away the most popular figure in the Soviet Union.

CHARLES POWELL

Richard Gozney, Esq.,
Foreign and Commonwealth Office