



Foreign and Commonwealth Office

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Jean Charles,

Soviet Union: Central Committee Plenum

The Plenum in Moscow is still under way; it will continue tomorrow morning. You may like some account of the proceedings so far before the Prime Minister's meetings tomorrow with Mr Medvedev (who should still arrive in time for his call at No 10) and with M Felber.

The purpose of the Plenum was to prepare the draft platform for the forthcoming Party Congress and to continue discussion of Lithuania following Gorbachev's visit there in early January. In practice, Gorbachev's opening address and the subsequent debate have focussed on the future of the Party. The main points from Gorbachev's speech and the draft platform were as follows:-

- a proposal that the Party Congress should be brought forward from October to June/July;

- a proposal that the post of General Secretary should be replaced by that of Party Chairman. (Gorbachev's intention appears to be to take on this post.)

- a clear indication that the Party should lose its political monopoly, and should undertake a radical review of its role and ideological base. Although Gorbachev did not refer explicitly to the abolition of Article 6 of the Constitution (which guarantees the Party's leading role), he said that the process of democratisation "could lead to the creation of parties at some stage." He argued for the rejection of ideological dogmatism and obsolete stereotypes both in internal and external policy, and said that the Party needed rejuvenation and a severance of links with the old authoritarian and bureaucratic system.

- a proposal that the Central Committee should be slimmed down from its present size of 250 to around 200 and that a new political executive committee should be established at the head of the Party. This would allow a more liberal and looser relationship between the centre and republican parties. The implication is that the role of the Politburo will decline.

Gorbachev also indicated that he hoped for increased powers for a redefined presidency, and there has been one report that there may have been discussion of direct elections to this post.

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The Plenum has been meeting in closed session, and we do not yet have a complete account of the proceedings on 5 and 6 February. The indications are that there has been a heated debate. Many hard-liners have criticised Gorbachev personally, and Ligachev appears to have received considerable applause. The balance of debate nevertheless appears to lie with Gorbachev and the reformist leadership.

There has so far been little discussion of Lithuania, and it is not clear whether this Plenum will adopt any specific decisions about the relationship between the CPSU and the Lithuanian Party - although the subject is on the agenda. It will be difficult for the Party leadership not to address this issue, and the subject may need to be addressed at a future meeting.

The crucial issue before the Plenum winds up will be the vote on the platform for the Congress. If Gorbachev gets the backing for which he is looking, there is likely to be a further Plenum in 3-4 weeks time to examine "draft statutes" which will put flesh on the ideas advanced by the leadership. If, contrary to expectation, Gorbachev does not gain support for his programme, he could find himself in an isolated and difficult position. The probability is that the majority of his ideas will be accepted.

Gorbachev may be planning to make some personnel changes at the end of the Plenum (a subject which traditionally comes up at the end of the session). This may be the occasion on which he tries to force the resignation of Ligachev. Vorotnikov (the President of the RSFSR) could also be vulnerable. If Sunday's demonstrators have their way, so could Yazov.

The Prime Minister's meeting with Mr Medvedev tomorrow will provide a good opportunity to learn about the debate of the past two days. As Ideology Secretary, Medvedev has a central interest in Gorbachev's effort to make the Party more pragmatic and to erode its privileged position. Medvedev is loyal to Gorbachev, but his own instincts are cautious and he will be responsive to the doubts of hard-line elements at middle levels in the Party who may feel that this is the last opportunity to protect their own position and the orthodox role of the Party.

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