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SOVIET UNION: THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE PLENUM: A PRELIMINARY  
ASSESSMENT

SUMMARY

1. THE PLENUM WAS AN IMPORTANT SUCCESS FOR GORBACHEV AND PERESTROIKA. BUT THIS SHOULD NOT BE OVERRATED. DESPITE THE DECISION TO DO AWAY WITH ARTICLE 6, THERE IS STILL A LONG WAY TO GO BEFORE THE STAGE IS SET FOR MULTI PARTY DEMOCRACY. ON THIS OCCASION HE HAS MANAGED TO MOVE THE REFORM PROCESS FORWARD WITHOUT PROVOKING CONFRONTATION WITH THE PARTY CONSERVATIVES. BUT GROWING POPULAR PRESSURE FOR MORE RAPID CHANGE MAY FORCE HIM SOON TO ABANDON HIS POLICY OF LEADING FROM THE CENTRE.

DETAIL

2. ON THE FACE OF IT, THE PLENUM HAS BEEN A SUBSTANTIAL SUCCESS FOR GORBACHEV. DESPITE THE GROWING POLARISATION OF SOCIETY AND THE PRESSURE HE HAS BEEN UNDER FROM THE PARTY OVER AZERBAIDZHAN AND LITHUANIA, HE HAS MANAGED TO PUT TOGETHER A NEW DRAFT PLATFORM FOR THE PARTY WHICH TAKES THE REFORM PROCESS FORWARD ON SEVERAL FRONTS AND WHICH HAS RECEIVED THE VIRTUALLY UNANIMOUS APPROVAL OF THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE.

3. WE STILL DO NOT HAVE THE TEXT OF THE DRAFT PLATFORM: THIS IS WHY THIS IS ONLY A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT. MUCH OF THE FINE PRINT, IN ANY CASE, WILL PROBABLY ONLY BE AGREED AT THE NEXT PLENUM IN 3 WEEKS ON THE NEW PARTY RULES. BUT AS FAR AS WE CAN GATHER FROM GORBACHEV'S SPEECH AND OTHER EVIDENCE, IT PROVIDES FOR:

- A NEW STRUCTURE AT THE TOP WITH A CHAIRMAN AND 2 DEPUTY CHAIRMEN
  - A SUBSTANTIAL SLIMMING DOWN OF THE APPARATUS FROM THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE DOWNWARDS
  - MORE INDEPENDENCE FOR REPUBLICAN PARTIES - THEY AND POSSIBLY OTHER POLITICAL GROUPS ARE TO BE ALLOWED THEIR OWN POLITICAL 'PLATFORMS':
- AND
- MORE SAY IN THE APPOINTMENT OF PARTY OFFICIALS FOR THE PARTY RANK AND FILE.

THE 28TH CONGRESS IS TO BE BROUGHT FORWARD TO LATE JUNE (YAKOVLEV CONFIRMED THIS TIMING IN HIS PRESS CONFERENCE AFTER THE PLENUM) AND IT SEEMS TO BE NOW WIDELY ACCEPTED THAT DELEGATES WILL BE, IN SOME FORM, DIRECTLY ELECTED BY THE LOCAL PARTIES WHICH SHOULD HELP PRODUCE A CONGRESS READY TO EMBARK ON THE RADICAL REFORMS. FINALLY, THE PARTY HAS CONCEDED THE NEED FOR A STRENGTHENED STATE PRESIDENCY, WHICH SHOULD FURTHER UNDERMINE THEIR INFLUENCE ON POLICY AT THE CENTRE. THE TIMING OF THIS, HOWEVER, IS UNCLEAR.

4. ALL THESE CHANGES ARE IMPORTANT: THEIR LIKELY EFFECT WILL BE TO FURTHER REDUCE THE ROLE OF THE PARTY APPARATUS AT ALL LEVELS BOTH WITHIN THE PARTY AND WITHIN THE COUNTRY. INEVITABLY, HOWEVER, MOST ATTENTION SO FAR HAS FOCUSED ON THE PARTY'S DECISION AT THE PLENUM TO PROPOSE THE AMENDMENT OR REJECTION OF ARTICLE 6 OF THE CONSTITUTION, WHICH ENDORSES THE PARTY'S LEADING ROLE.

5. THE PROPOSAL FOR CHANGE TO ARTICLE 6 WILL BE MADE TO THE SUPREME SOVIET AND CONGRESS OF PEOPLE'S DEPUTIES WHO HAVE THE FINAL DECISION ON AMENDMENTS TO THE CONSTITUTION. IT HAS BEEN WIDELY ACCEPTED IN THE PARTY FOR SOME TIME THAT ARTICLE 6 NEEDED TO BE CHANGED. BUT GORBACHEV AND OTHERS HAVE HITHERTO AGREED THAT THIS SHOULD BE DONE IN SLOW TIME - AS PART OF THE PROCESS OF REWRITING THE WHOLE CONSTITUTION. NOW, AS A RESULT OF THE PLENUM'S DECISION, IT IS LIKELY TO HAPPEN QUITE QUICKLY. THE PARTY COULD WELL INTRODUCE THEIR PROPOSAL BEFORE THE ELECTIONS (DUE IN MOST REGIONS ON 4 MARCH) IN ORDER TO REAP ANY ELECTORAL BENEFITS THERE WILL BE. IN THE POST-PLENUM PRESS CONFERENCE, VICE PRESIDENT LUKYANOV, REFERRING TO THE SUPREME SOVIET DISCUSSION, SAID THERE ARE MANY WHO STILL WANTED TO KEEP ARTICLE 6. BUT NOW THE PLENUM HAS SPOKEN, IT IS VIRTUALLY INCONCEIVABLE THAT THE SUPREME SOVIET OR THE CONGRESS OF DEPUTIES WILL VOTE FOR RETENTION.

6. THE LIKELIHOOD IS THEREFORE THAT, WITHIN THE NEXT FEW MONTHS, THE PARTY WILL LOSE ITS CONSTITUTIONAL STATUS AS THE LEADING FORCE IN SOCIETY, WITH THE RIGHT TO DETERMINE AND DIRECT POLICY. SUGGESTIONS, HOWEVER, THAT THIS IN ITSELF WILL BRING THE END OF THE ONE PARTY SYSTEM AND THE ADVENT OF PLURALIST DEMOCRACY ARE PREMATURE. THE CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE COULD WELL PROVE IN PRACTICE TO BE MORE SYMBOLIC THAN REAL. THE PARTY'S MONOPOLY OF POWER EXISTED, WELL BEFORE ARTICLE 6 WAS INTRODUCED INTO THE CONSTITUTION UNDER BREZHNEV. IN THEORY, IT COULD CONTINUE TO EXIST AFTER ITS DISAPPEARANCE. A SIMPLE DECISION TO DELETE THE ARTICLE WOULD NOT IN ITSELF PROVIDE ANY LEGAL BASIS FOR THE FORMATION OF OTHER PARTIES, AND NO SUCH LEGAL BASIS AT PRESENT EXISTS. THE LANGUAGE OF THE DRAFT PLATFORM ON THE

PARTY: ROLE AND RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER POLITICAL ORGANISATIONS IS VAGUE: ALMOST CERTAINLY DELIBERATELY SO. THE REFERENCE TO THE PARTY NEEDING TO 'STRUGGLE' TO REMAIN THE LEADING PARTY, LEAVES PLENTY OF SCOPE FOR ARGUING THAT THERE SHOULD BE NO IMMEDIATE CHANGE. SIMILARLY WITH THE REFERENCE TO THE POSSIBLE ESTABLISHMENT OF OTHER PARTIES 'AT A CERTAIN STAGE'.

7. THIS RAISES THE QUESTION: TO WHAT EXTENT DO THE SUPPOSED CONSERVATIVE MAJORITY IN THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE SEE THEMSELVES AS HAVING MADE REAL CONCESSIONS AT THIS PLENUM. THERE MAY NOW BE A NUMBER WHO HAVE ACCEPTED SOME FORM OF REAL PLURALIST DEMOCRACY AS INEVITABLE AND WHO ARE PREPARING TO DO BATTLE AS BEST THEY CAN. BUT THERE ARE ALSO LIKELY TO BE A LARGE NUMBER WHO SEE THEMSELVES ONLY MAKING TACTICAL ADJUSTMENTS TO REDUCE THE PRESSURE FROM REFORMISTS WHILE REMAINING COMMITTED TO KEEPING ALL THE ESSENTIALS OF THE PARTY'S POWER INTACT. IN THE SPEECHES OF THEIR LEADING REPRESENTATIVES SUCH AS LIGACHEV (REPORTEDLY VERY WELL RECEIVED) AND GIDASPOV THERE WAS LITTLE SIGN THAT THEY SAW ANY NEED FOR MAJOR CHANGE. IT IS STRIKING THAT THE ONLY VOTE AGAINST THE PLATFORM CAME FROM ELTSIN - THE MAIN RADICAL IN THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE.

8. GORBACHEV PROBABLY NOW ACCEPTS THAT SOME FORM OF MULTI PARTY STRUCTURE IS INEVITABLE, BUT HE WILL BE QUITE HAPPY TO DELAY CRUCIAL DECISIONS ON THIS UNTIL THE CONGRESS AT THE EARLIEST. THERE IS NO EVIDENCE HE IS THINKING OF ABANDONING THE COMMUNIST PARTY. HIS AIM STILL APPEARS TO BE TO REFORM ITS PERSONNEL AND STRUCTURE SUFFICIENTLY FOR IT TO REGAIN POPULAR RESPECT AND BECOME A VIABLE FORCE WHEN THE TIME COMES FOR IT TO COMPETE AGAINST OTHER PARTIES. HE MUST CALCULATE THAT THIS WILL TAKE SOME TIME - EVEN SUPPOSING IT IS POSSIBLE. THE PARTY MACHINE IS BECOMING DAILY MORE DISCREDITED BOTH IN THE REPUBLICS AND IN CENTRAL RUSSIA WHERE MANY PARTY LEADERS ARE BEING FORCED OUT OF OFFICE BY POPULAR PRESSURE. FOR THE TIME BEING, THESE DEMONSTRATIONS OF PEOPLE POWER - PROVIDED THEY DO NOT GET TOTALLY OUT OF CONTROL - WILL BE WELCOME TO GORBACHEV AND WILL GIVE THE REFORM PROCESS IMPORTANT MOMENTUM. BUT IT ALSO SERVES AS A WARNING THAT ANY PARTY WHICH IS TO REMAIN A VIABLE FORCE WILL HAVE TO BE VERY DIFFERENT FROM THAT WHICH EXISTS TODAY. ALMOST CERTAINLY, THE CHANGES PRODUCED IN THIS PLATFORM WILL NOT IN THEMSELVES BE SUFFICIENT. MANY BELIEVE THAT, GIVEN THE PRESSURES, GORBACHEV WILL BE UNABLE TO CONTINUE TO PURSUE THE REFORM PROCESS FOR MUCH LONGER BY CONSENSUS: THAT HE WILL BE FORCED TO COME OFF THE FENCE AND JOIN THE RADICALS.

9. THE LESSON FROM THIS PLENUM, HOWEVER, IS THAT HE IS STILL TRYING

TO ACHIEVE THE NECESSARY REFORMS IN THE PARTY BY CONSENSUS WITHOUT PROVOKING SPLITS OR CONFRONTATION IN THE PARTY. JUDGED BY THIS CRITERIA: THE PLENUM WAS A CONSIDERABLE PERSONAL SUCCESS. BUT THE BATTLE IS FAR FROM WON YET.

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