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FM MOSCOW
TO IMMEDIATE FCO
TELNO 497
OF 231507Z MARCH 90
INFO CSCE POSTS

LITHUANIA: HOW SERIOUS IS THE CRISIS?

SUMMARY

1. LITHUANIANS IN A HIGHLY EMOTIONAL STATE. MOST HERE BELIEVE THEY ARE BADLY MISPLAYING THEIR HAND. GORBACHEV HAS NO REAL ALTERNATIVE TO HIS PRESENT POLICY. BALANCE OF PROBABILITY REMAINS THAT MOSCOW AND LITHUANIANS WILL FIND A WAY OF SITTING DOWN TOGETHER. BUT THERE ARE RISKS.

DETAIL

2. GORBACHEV'S LATEST MESSAGE TO LANDSBERGIS GIVING HIM 2 DAYS TO DROP PLANS FOR A VOLUNTEER MILITIA COMES AT THE END OF A WEEK OF STEADILY RISING TENSION BETWEEN LITHUANIA AND MOSCOW. IT IS TIME TO ASSESS HOW MATTERS STAND AND WHERE THEY MIGHT LEAD.

3. TO SUMMARISE THE MAIN EVENS SO FAR:

- 11 MARCH THE NEWLY ELECTED LITHUANIAN SUPREME SOVIET DECLARES INDEPENDENCE, INFORMS GORBACHEV AND RYZHKOV AND ELECTS SAJUDIS LEADER LANDSBERGIS AS CHAIRMAN.
- 15 MARCH: USSR CONGRESS OF DEPUTIES DECREES THAT LITHUANIAN ACTION IS ILLEGAL ACCOMPANIED BY A GORBACHEV TELEGRAM DEMANDING A RESPONSE WITHIN 3 DAYS.
- 19 MARCH: RYZHKOV INSTRUCTS ALL UNION MINISTRIES NOT TO ENTER INTO DISCUSSIONS ABOUT TRANSFER OF ASSETS TO LITHUANIAN CONTROL: TELLS AUTHORITIES TO GUARANTEE UNINTERRUPTED COMMUNICAITONS AND TO STEP UP SECURITY AT NUCLEAR AND OTHER KEY INSTALLATIONS.
- 21 MARCH: GORBACHEV PRESIDENTIAL EDICT TO HAND IN FIREARMS OR HAVE THEM CONFISCATED AND FOR MOSCOW TO CONTROL VISA REGIME FOR FOREIGNERS AND ESTABLISH STRONGER BORDER CONTROLS
- 2 MARCH: GORBACHEV TELEGRAM, REQUIRES THAT RECRUITMENT OF A LITHUANIAN VOLUNTEER IS STOPPED WITHIN 2 DAYS.

4. THE LITHUANIANS HAVE RESPONDED TO THESE DEMANDS BY DENOUNCING THE MOSCOW DECREES AS FOREIGN INTERFERENCE IN THE AFFAIRS OF A SOVEREIGN STATE. LANDSBERGIS HAS SPOKEN OF QUOTE THE SPECTRE OF STALINISM STALKING THE KREMLIN UNQUOTE

5. THE LITHUANIANS ARE IN A STATE OF POST-INDEPENDENCE EUPHORIA. THE GOVERNMENT IS DOMINATED, AS ONE RECENT VISITOR COMMENTED, BY PHILOSOPHERS AND MUSICIANS. NONE HAVE ANY REAL EXPERIENCE OF POLITICS: THEY ARE BEING CARRIED ALONG ON A WAVE OF POPULAR EMOTION. THEY PROMISED THEIR PEOPLE IMMEDIATE AND COMPLETE INDEPENDENCE IF THEY WERE ELECTED AND ARE NOW SETTING ABOUT ON ALL SIDES TO ACHIEVE IT. BEYOND THIS THEY APPEAR TO HAVE NO COHERENT ECONOMIC OR POLITICAL STRATEGY. BRAZAUSKAS, THE ONLY POLITICIAN WITH SUFFICIENT POPULAR STATURE TO EXERCISE A MODERATING INFLUENCE, HAS BEEN RATHER CLUMSILY SIDELINED BY SAJUDIS. HE IS ALSO THE ONLY POLITICIAN WITH EXPERIENCE OF HOW TO HANDLE MOSCOW. FOR THE REST, THEY ARE CONFIDENT THAT MOSCOW WILL NOT SEND IN THE TROOPS, AND SEEM TO BELIEVE THAT, THIS ASIDE, GORBACHEV HAS NO OTHER OPTIONS. THE IMPRESSION OF RECENT VISITORS IS THAT THEY SUBSTANTIALLY UNDERESTIMATE THE ECONOMIC CARDS HE HAS TO PLAY, AND BELIEVE THAT IF THEY KEEP UP THE PRESSURE GORBACHEV WILL BE FORCED TO TALK. THEY AND THE OTHER BALTIC STATES HAVE HAD SUBSTANTIAL SUCCESS WITH THESE TACTICS IN THE LAST YEAR. AND THEY HAVE BEEN WATCHING EVENTS IN EASTERN EUROPE. SOME MAY BELIEVE THAT, IF THINGS REACH CRISIS POINT, THE WEST WILL COME TO THE RESCUE.

6. LITHUANIA'S CONFRONTATIONAL POLICY IS PUTTING GORBACHEV IN A VERY DIFFICULT POSITION. ONE OF THE JUSTIFICATIONS FOR CREATING THE NEW PRESIDENCY WAS THE NEED TO DEAL MORE EFFECTIVELY WITH THE PROBLEMS OF EMPIRE. GORBACHEV NOW HAS TO PROVE HIS POINT. AT PRESENT HE IS TRYING TO PUSH THROUGH THE SUPREME SOVIET A BATCH OF RADICAL MEASURES (NOT, OF COURSE, AS RADICAL AS MANY REPUBLICS WOULD LIKE) TO REFORM THE FEDERAL STRUCTURE. THEY INCLUDE A MECHANISM FOR REPUBLICS TO SECEDE. AT THIS POINT, HE CANNOT BE SEEN TO BE CAVING IN TO LITHUANIAN PRESSURE BY AGREEING TO TALKS AT A TIME WHEN THEY ARE UNILATERALLY TAKING UPON THEMSELVES MOST OF THE ATTRIBUTES OF STATEHOOD (THEIR OWN MILITIA, CURRENCY AND BORDER AND CUSTOMS CONTROLS) AND THREATENING TO SEIZE SOVIET ECONOMIC ASSETS.

7. THERE ARE SOME WHO ARGUE THAT GORBACHEV SHOULD STAND ASIDE FOR A WHILE AND LET THE LITHUANIANS RUN OUT OF STEAM. BUT THIS WOULD RUN THE RISK OF LETTING THE LITHUANIANS ESTABLISH THEIR POSITION FOR TALKS AS AN INDEPENDENT SOVEREIGN STATE. THE ARMY, NERVOUS ABOUT THEIR ACCESS TO MILITARY BASES IN LITHUANIA AND KALININGRAD WOULD STRONGLY OPPOSE SUCH A POLICY. THERE IS MUCH TO BE SAID FOR EXCHANGING THE CURRENT POLICY OF PUBLIC WARNINGS FOR SOME SESSIONS OF BEHIND-THE-SCENES DIPLOMACY (THERE IS NO SIGN THAT THIS IS GOING ON AT THE MOMENT). BUT, IN THE PAST, THIS HAS NOT BEEN AN ACTIVITY IN WHICH THE LITHUANIANS HAVE SHOWN THEMSELVES VERY ADEPT. LITHUANIANS

SUMMONED TO MOSCOW FOR SUCH TALKS HAVE PROMPTLY BROADCAST THE OUTCOME TO THE WORLD'S PRESS ON RETURN TO LITHUANIA. GORBACHEV PROBABLY FEARS THAT THIS WOULD HAPPEN AGAIN AND BE TAKEN AS A SIGN OF WEAKNESS ON HIS PART.

8. GORBACHEV, THEREFORE, HAS FEW REAL ALTERNATIVES TO HIS POLICY OF ISSUING PUBLIC WARNINGS WHILE THE LITHUANIANS CONTINUE THEIR PRESENT TACTICS. I BELIEVE THAT HE HAS STILL RULED OUT USING REAL FORCE. NOR DO I THINK HE WILL BE UNDER PRESSURE OVER THIS FROM OTHERS IN MOSCOW. EVEN ARMY GENERALS WILL UNDERSTAND THE CONSEQUENCES AND, FOR MOST OF THEM, THEY WOULD NOT BE WELCOME. BUT MOSCOW'S CURRENT POLICY DOES INVOLVE THE REAL RISK, IN A HIGHLY VOLATILE SITUATION, THAT ONE SIDE OR ANOTHER MIGHT MISJUDGE THE SITUATION. JUST AS THE LITHUANIANS HAVE LITTLE EXPERIENCE OF NEGOTIATING WITH MOSCOW, SO GORBACHEV PROBABLY HAS LITTLE UNDERSTANDING OF THE STRENGTH OF LITHUANIAN NATIONALISM OR OF THE EXTENT TO WHICH LITHUANIANS DISLIKE AND MISTRUST RUSSIANS. HE MAY ALSO NOT FULLY APPRECIATE THAT THE EMOTIONAL STATE IN LITHUANIA IS SUCH THAT THE SAJUDIS LEADERS WILL FIND IT DIFFICULT TO EMBARK ON ANYTHING THAT COULD BE SEEN AS REPRESENTED AS A CLIMB DOWN IN FACE OF THREATS FROM MOSCOW. ONE SIDE OR THE OTHER COULD PAINT THEMSELVES INTO A CORNER. SOME OF MOSCOW'S RECENT INSTRUCTIONS EG DISARMING THE POPULATION, ABANDONING PLANS FOR A POPULAR MILITIA - GORBACHEV WILL HAVE TO BE SEEN TO ENFORCE IF THE LITHUANIANS DO NOT COMPLY. THIS COULD PROVOKE A MAJOR REACTION. THEY MAY COMPROMISE: BUT THEY HAVE SHOWN LITTLE SIGN SO FAR OF BEING COWED BY MOSCOW'S THREATS. THERE IS ALSO THE DANGER THAT THE RUSSIAN MINORITY IN LITHUANIA, POSSIBLY EGGED ON BY SOME IN RUSSIA, MAY DELIBERATELY PROVOKE INCIDENTS. IN MOSCOW THERE IS A SENSE OF ANXIETY THOUGH EVEN MOST LIBERALS THINK THE LITHUANIANS ARE BEING NEEDLESSLY PROVOCATIVE.

9. IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO PREDICT HOW THINGS WILL GO. MOSCOW IS LIKELY TO CONTINUE ITS ATTEMPTS TO ENSURE ITS BASIC MILITARY AND ECONOMIC INTERESTS IN LITHUANIA AND, AT THE SAME TIME TO STEADILY INCREASE THE ECONOMIC PRESSURE - BUT REFRAINING IF POSSIBLE FROM A FULL ECONOMIC BLOCKADE WHICH THEY WILL PROBABLY JUDGE TO BE TOO PROVOCATIVE TO THE WEST. THERE ARE ALREADY REPORTS THAT DELIVERY OF OIL AND OTHER RAW MATERIALS HAVE BEEN CUT BACK.

10. MY FEELING IS THAT, IN THE FACE OF THIS PRESSURE THE LITHUANIANS WILL AT SOME POINT FIND A WAY OF MODERATING THEIR STANCE AND THAT, AS A RESULT, A COMMON BASIS WILL BE FOUND FOR TALKS. GORBACHEV HAS CAREFULLY LEFT THE DOOR OPEN FOR THIS. ESTONIANS AND LATVIANS MOST OF WHOM ALSO BELIEVE THAT THE LITHUANIANS ARE SERIOUSLY MISJUDGING THE

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SITUATION - MAY HELP IN THIS PROCESS. BUT THIS IS NOT AN ENTIRELY CONFIDENT JUDGEMENT. THE RISKS REFERRED TO ABOVE ARE REAL, AND NEXT WEEK IS LIKELY TO BE A POLITICALLY TESTING TIME FOR BOTH MOSCOW AND THE LITHUANIANS

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