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LITHUANIA

1. I HAD A LONG TALK THIS MORNING (30 MARCH) WITH LAPTEV, THE CHIEF EDITOR OF IZVESTIYA. AMONG OTHER THINGS WE DISCUSSED LITHUANIA. LAPTEV IS A SHREWD AND EXPERIENCE FIGURE WHO HAS CLOSE CONTACTS WITH THE TOP LEADERSHIP.
2. HE SAID THAT LITHUANIANS HAD PUT GORBACHEV IN A VERY VERY DIFFICULT POSITION. IT WAS A TRAGI-COMEDY. TRAGIC BECAUSE THE OF RISKS IT POSED FOR PERESTROIKA; COMIC BECAUSE GORBACHEV WAS IN FACT PREPARED TO GIVE THE LITHUANIANS VIRTUALLY EVERYTHING THEY WANTED. BUT HE HAD TO BE SEEN TO BE 'GIVING' IT. HE COULD NOT AFFORD TO BE HUMILIATED. AT THIS INITIAL STAGE OF THE PRESIDENCY, PRESIDENTIAL DECREES HAD TO BE SEEN TO BE IMPLEMENTED. RUSSIA/THE SOVIET UNION WAS A COUNTRY THAT WAS USED TO GAINING TERRITORY - NOT USED TO GIVING IT AWAY. THE LITHUANIANS HAD TO UNDERSTAND THIS. THEY ALSO HAD TO UNDERSTAND THAT GORBACHEV WAS UNDER CONSIDERABLE PRESSURE FROM PEOPLE IN MOSCOW WHO DID NOT UNDERSTAND THE FULL COMPLICAITONS OF THE SITUATION. HOWEVER, LAPTEV STRESSED ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS, THAT THE LEADERSHIP WAS STILL COMMITTED TO RESOLVING THE PROBLEM BY POLITICAL MEANS: AND THAT THEY EXPECTED THAT IN THE END LITHUANIA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE UNION WOULD BE ONE OF AUTONOMY FURTHERING A CONFEDERATION OR EVEN FULL INDEPENDENCE.
3. LAPTEV AGREED THAT THERE WAS A RISK OF ACCIDENTIAL ESCALATION. THE LITHUANIANS HAD MADE THEMSELVES AND GORBACHEV HOSTAGES TO THE ABILITY OF THE SOVIET ARMED FORCES TO PRESERVE THEIR DISCIPLINE. I STRESSED THE IMPORTANCE OF MAINTAINING EFFECTIVE POLITICAL CONTROL OVER THE ARMY, POINTING OUT THAT LAST YEAR'S EVENTS IN TBILISI HAD SHOWED WHAT HAPPENED WHEN THIS DID NOT EXIST. LAPTEV SAID THAT SUCH CONTROL DID EXIST. GENERAL VERENNIKOV HAD BEEN SENT TO LITHUANIA ON THE EXPRESS INSTRUCTIONS OF GORBAHCEV. HE WOULD NOT TAKE ANY MAJOR DECISION WITHOUT CONSULTATION. BUT POLITICIANS COULD NOT CONTROL THE MOVEMENTS OF EVERY TANK. IN RESPONSE TO MY QUESTION, LAPTEV SAID THAT IT WAS VARENNIKOV AND NOT GORBAHCEV WHO HAD AUTHORITISED THE MOVEMENT OF AN ARMED COLUMN THROUGH VILNIUS ON THE MORNING OF 24

MARCH.

4. WHAT WAS NEEDED NOW WAS FOR LANDSBERGIS TO THINK OF HIS COUNTRY RATHER THAN HIMSELF AND GET ON A PLANE AND COME TO MOSCOW. THEN THINGS WOULD CALM DOWN. LAPTEV DREW A PARALLEL WITH KARL RENNER THE AUSTRIAN PRESIDENT WHO HAD BEEN WILLING TO COME TO MOSCOW IN THE MID-50'S AND SO PAVED THE WAY FOR THE AUSTRIAN TREATY. INSTEAD, LANDSBERGIS WAS APPEALING TO THE US CONGRESS. IT WAS VERY IMPORTANT THAT THEY GAVE A MODERATE AND CONSIDERED RESPONSE. LANDSBERGIS, UNLIKE BRAZAUSKAS WAS A TOTALLY INEXPERIENCED POLITICIAN. HE WAS ALREADY BEGINNING TO LOSE POPULAR RESPECT IN LITHUANIA. PEOPLE WERE BEGINNING TO MAKE JOKES ABOUT HIS DAILY RHETORIC. BRAZAUSKAS WAS WAITING IN THE WINGS.

COMMENT

5. LAPTEV'S REMARKS AGAIN REVEAL MOSCOW'S DEEP ANXIETY TO AVOID AN ESCALATION OF THE CRISIS. BUT, AS HE MAKES CLEAR, THERE ARE LIMITS TO GORBACHEV'S ABILITY TO BE FLEXIBLE. THERE IS ALSO THE CONTINUING DANGER OF ACCIDENTS. IT IS INTERESTING, ASSUMING IT IS TRUE, THAT IT WAS VARENNIKOV AND NOT GORBACHEV OR ANOTHER POLITICAL FIGURE WHO AUTHORISED THE SHOW OF MILITARY STRENGTH IN VOLNIUS ON 24 MARCH. THIS SUGGESTS HE HAS CONSIDERABLE FREEDOM OF ACTION WITHIN THE GUIDELINES HE HAS RECEIVED FROM GORBACHEV.

6. I AGREE WITH LAPTEV ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF THE US CONGRESS AGREEING ON A MEASURED RESPONSE TO THE LANDSBERGIS APPEAL. LANDSBERGIS HAS BEEN COUNTING ON STRONG WESTERN SUPPORT TO MAKE HIS CONFRONTATIONAL APPROACH WORK. SO FAR HE HAS NOT GOT THIS IN THE FORM HE NEEDED. THE APPEAL TO CONGRESS MAY BE HIS LAST THROW. IF IT DOES NOT WORK, HE MAY DECIDE TO MAKE MORE SERIOUS MOVES TOWARDS AN ACCOMMODATION WITH MOSCOW. OR, HE MAY BE FORCED TO BY OTHERS - PARTICULARLY IF LAPTEV IS RIGHT AND HE IS ALREADY BEGINNING TO LOSE POPULARITY. WE COULD THEN BE OVER THE WORST OF THE CRISIS.

7. THE NEW FEDERAL COUNCIL MEETS FOR THE FIRST TIME TODAY 30 MARCH: LITHUANIA IS ALMOST CERTAIN TO BE A MAJOR TOPIC

BRAITHWAITE

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