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GORBACHEV'S VISIT TO CZECHOSLOVAKIA: CONCLUSIONS. *ms*

SUMMARY.

1. AN IMPORTANT VISIT. GORBACHEV ENDORSED HUSAK'S POLICY OF GRADUAL ECONOMIC REFORM BUT SAID VIRTUALLY NOTHING ABOUT THE EXTENSION OF GLASNOST' MORE GENERALLY TO THE POLITICAL SYSTEM OR TO CULTURAL OR INTELLECTUAL LIFE. USEFUL CONFIRMATION THAT SOVIET PRIORITIES IN EASTERN EUROPE LIE IN SECURING BROAD SUPPORT, POLITICAL AND INDUSTRIAL, FOR PERESTROJKA IN CONDITIONS OF STABILITY, RATHER THAN IN INSISTING ON TURNING EASTERN EUROPEAN LEADERS INTO SOVIET CLONES. THE CZECHOSLOVAK LEADERSHIP WILL BE PLEASED TO HAVE POWERFUL SOVIET SUPPORT FOR THEIR GENERAL POLICY. NEVERTHELESS THE DISPUTE HERE OVER THE BALANCE BETWEEN REFORM AND PARTY CONTROL IS LIKELY TO CONTINUE. NO EVIDENCE FROM THE VISIT AS TO WHO MIGHT REPLACE CZECHOSLOVAKIA'S AGING LEADERS, OR WHEN.

DETAIL.

CZECHOSLOVAKIA AND REFORM.

2. THIS WAS GORBACHEV'S FIRST VISIT TO A CMEA COUNTRY SINCE THE JANUARY PLENUM OF THE SOVIET PARTY CENTRAL COMMITTEE. IT HAD BEEN EXPECTED, INDEED HOPED, IN SOME QUARTERS THAT GORBACHEV WOULD PRESS THE CZECHOSLOVAK LEADERSHIP TO SPEED UP THE PROCESS OF ECONOMIC REFORM, AND EXTEND IT TO WIDER SPHERES. OUR CONSIDERED ASSESSMENT HAD HOWEVER BEEN THAT HUSAK WOULD BE ABLE TO PRESENT HIS POLICY AS RIGHT IN LOCAL CIRCUMSTANCES, AS ENABLING CZECHOSLOVAKIA TO MAKE THE NECESSARY ECONOMIC REFORMS, WITHOUT RISKING A 1968-STYLE POLITICAL EXPLOSION. IN PUBLIC GORBACHEV PRAISED CZECHOSLOVAKIA'S ECONOMIC ACHIEVEMENTS (WHICH ARE INDEED STRIKING FROM A SOVIET STAND POINT) AND SPOKE APPROVINGLY OF THE DIRECTION IN WHICH CZECHOSLOVAKIA IS TRYING TO MOVE: IN HIS MAIN SPEECH ON 10 APRIL HE ECHOED THE TERMS USED BY THE CZECHOSLOVAK LEADERSHIP. RUDE PRAVO QUOTED THIS PASSAGE WITH SATISFACTION ON 14 APRIL. HE DID HOWEVER MAKE IT CLEAR THAT THE SOVIET UNION WAS SERIOUS IN PRESSING FOR BETTER CMEA COOPERATION (WHICH STROUGAL WROTE OFF AS UNACHIEVABLE WHEN SPEAKING TO WHITEHEAD IN FEBRUARY) AND MORE JOINT ENTERPRISES. THE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT HOWEVER THAT PRICING NEEDED TO BE TACKLED WILL HAVE PLEASED THE STROUGAL FACTION AS REALISTIC.

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LEADERSHIP

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4. ON THE SURFACE, GORBACHEV TREATED THE LEADERSHIP WITH FULLY SUFFICIENT RESPECT. NOTHING WAS SAID IN PUBLIC TO HINT AT THE NEED FOR LEADERSHIP CHANGE. NO ONE WAS SINGLED OUT FOR PRAISE BUT HE RUBBED SHOULDERS WITH ALL SHADES. DISSIDENT OPINION INCLINES TO THE VIEW THAT HUSAK GOT AWAY WITH A REPRIEVE FOR THE PRESENT RULING GENERATION. BUT GORBACHEV MUST HAVE BEEN SIZING UP POSSIBLE CANDIDATES.

THE EASTERN EUROPEAN DIMENSION.

5. GORBACHEV DEVOTED ABOUT A FIFTH OF HIS 10 APRIL SPEECH TO THE QUESTION OF RELATIONS BETWEEN EASTERN EUROPEAN PARTIES AND THE SOVIET PARTY. SUBSEQUENT SOVIET BRIEFING ON THESE PASSAGES INDICATES THAT THEY ARE INTENDED TO BE READ AS AN IMPORTANT RESTATEMENT OF PHILOSOPHY. THE EARLIER TEXTS WILL NEED TO BE STUDIED FOR CONFIRMATION BUT GORBACHEV IS SEEN HERE AS PUTTING THE EMPHASIS DIFFERENTLY FROM HIS PREDECESSORS. THERE ARE NOW MANY PATHS TO NIRVANA. WHILE SOCIALIST SOLIDARITY, CLOSER CMEA COOPERATION AND THE BASIC RIGHTNESS OF THE COMMUNIST MODEL ARE TAKEN FOR GRANTED, NO ONE 'HAS A MONOPOLY OF TRUTH', AND DIFFERENT APPROACHES ARE RECOGNISED AS INEVITABLE REFLECTING DIFFERENT CONDITIONS. GORBACHEV IS SURPRISINGLY FRANK ABOUT THE FACT THAT EASTERN EUROPE IS MORE ADVANCED THAN THE SOVIET UNION: 'SOME PROBLEMS HAVE ALREADY BEEN SOLVED IN OTHER SOCIALIST COUNTRIES'. BUT THERE IS A MESSAGE FOR ALL EASTERN EUROPE IN WHAT IS GOING ON IN THE SOVIET UNION, BECAUSE SOVIET RECONSTRUCTION 'CORRESPONDS TO THE ESSENCE OF SOCIALISM'. AND WHATEVER MOVES ARE MADE TOWARDS SOCIALIST DEMOCRATISATION ACROSS WARSAW PACT FRONTIERS WE MUST ASSUME THAT IT REMAINS THE BASIC TENET OF THE BREZHNEV DOCTRINE THAT LEAVING THE CLUB IS NOT AN OPTION OPEN TO MEMBERS.

PERSONAL RECEPTION.

6. GORBACHEV SCORED A CONSIDERABLE PERSONAL SUCCESS IN HIS PUBLIC APPEARANCES. HIS STYLE, ASTONISHINGLY INFORMAL BY LOCAL STANDARDS, WENT DOWN WELL WITH A PUBLIC STARVED OF PRESENTABLE LEADERS. CROWD REACTION ON HIS NUMEROUS WALKABOUTS WAS WARM AND INTERESTED, ALBEIT QUIET AND RESTRAINED (IN CZECHOSLOVAK STYLE). BUT 19 YEARS AFTER SOVIET TANKS WERE IN THE SAME STREETS, IT WAS A REASONABLE PUBLIC RELATIONS PERFORMANCE. EVEN THE CZECHOSLOVAK LEADERSHIP WERE RELAXING BY THE END OF THE VISIT, AND ENJOYING SOME SPIN-OFF FROM THE SUCCESS OF GORBACHEV'S APPARENT APPROACHABILITY.

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CONCLUSION

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7. HUSAK NOW HAS, WITHIN THE LIMITS OF THE SYSTEM, A RELATIVELY FREE HAND IN MAPPING OUT POLICY IN THE FINAL PERIOD OF HIS LEADERSHIP. TIME HAS BEEN GAINED FOR HIS PROGRAMME OF LIMITED ECONOMIC REFORM TO SHOW WHETHER IT CAN ACHIEVE ITS AIMS. IT WOULD NOT BE CHARACTERISTIC FOR HIM TO USE HIS FREEDOM TO MAKE DRASTIC CHANGES, AND HE WILL PROBABLY CONTINUE TO DEVELOP THE POLICY SET OUT BY THE 17TH PARTY CONGRESS. IT MAY BE THAT HE WILL NOW FEEL SECURE ENOUGH TO BEGIN BRINGING SOME NEW FACES INTO A LEADERSHIP WHICH BADLY NEEDS TO LOCATE A SUCCESSOR GENERATION BEFORE OLD AGE AND ILL-HEALTH REMOVE A GROUP OF MEN WHO HAVE MAINTAINED REMARKABLE SOLIDARITY OVER THE LAST 19 YEARS.

8. BUT THE UNDERCURRENTS AND ANOMALIES REMAIN. THE DESCRIPTION BY GORBACHEV OF RECONSTRUCTION IN THE SOVIET UNION (OCCUPYING NEARLY A THIRD OF HIS 10 APRIL SPEECH) SHOWED IT TO BE MORE COMPREHENSIVE AND STARTLING THAN ITS WATERED DOWN VERSION HERE. THE 'VALUABLE INCENTIVES' OF THE SOVIET MODEL WILL CONTINUE TO PERCOLATE. THERE MAY BE PRESSURE FOR MORE ECONOMIC REFORM, AND AT A CERTAIN STAGE THE CONTRADICTIONS BETWEEN THE DRIVE FOR ECONOMIC REFORM AND LACK OF CHANGE ELSEWHERE WILL RESURFACE. ALREADY STROUGAL HAS ADDUCED THE SPIRIT OF THE VISIT TO SUPPORT HIS OWN VIEWS OF REFORM IN A SPEECH ON 13 APRIL, SAYING THAT 'SOVIET PERESTROJKA MUST BE FOLLOWED BY CZECHOSLOVAK RESTRUCTURING. NO OTHER PATH EXISTS FOR US'. HUSAK WILL HAVE TO BEGIN TO MOVE THINGS ON THIS YEAR IF THE TEMPORARY TRUCE IS NOT TO BECOME RAGGED.

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