

From: G D G Murrell

Date: 2 November 1987

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ELTSIN

1. At a press conference in Moscow on 31 October the Central Committee Secretary Lukyanov confirmed reports that the Moscow Party leader Eltsin had offered his resignation at the CC Plenum on 21 October and said that matters arising from this would be considered by the Politburo and the Moscow Party Committee.

2. The fact that Lukyanov implicitly criticised Eltsin, referring to the view that there were "practical mistakes" in his statement at the Plenum and saying that it contained assessments with which Central Committee members did not agree, indicates that, whether or not Eltsin later withdrew his offer or threat to resign, his situation is now precarious.

3. The substance of Eltsin's statement is still unclear, especially whether or not he referred to an alleged cult of Gorbachev's personality. But the thrust was evidently an attack on conservatives in the leadership (principally aimed at Ligachev) for obstructing the progress of perestroika, which backfired and brought down criticism on his own head. Whatever the rights or wrongs of Eltsin's speech at the Plenum, or of his performance as Moscow Party leader, his demise would be a severe set-back for perestroika and for Gorbachev personally. He is one of the few members of the leadership who appear to be wholeheartedly behind radical reform and glasnost, and the success or failure of his attempt to tackle the entrenched Moscow bureaucracy has been widely seen as a crucial test case for the prospects of perestroika as a whole.

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4. Eltsin has played a key role in the reform process going well beyond the administration of Moscow itself. He has exercised

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considerable influence over the development of glasnost' and cultural liberalisation through his jurisdiction over the Party committees of the creative unions and by permitting and encouraging exhibitions, public meetings and discussion clubs in the capital. Since the Party committees of all Ministries, organisations and institutes located in Moscow are formally subordinate to the Moscow Party Committee he has been in a position to apply reformist pressure to the whole central state bureaucracy and intellectual establishment.

5. At the Party Congress Eltsin is thought to have played the role of trail-blazer or lightning conductor for Gorbachev by making a more radical and outspoken speech attacking the Party bureaucracy than the General Secretary felt able to deliver in his official report. On that occasion too his speech drew a sharp retort from Ligachev. (It is significant that at the recent Plenum Eltsin was the first speaker, immediately followed by Ligachev).

6. It is a matter for speculation whether at the Plenum Eltsin spoke as he did with the knowledge and approval of Gorbachev or entirely on his own initiative. If it was a calculated challenge to the conservatives it appears to have badly misfired. Gorbachev is now faced with the dilemma of whether to defend or sacrifice a man who is a key ally, albeit possibly something of a maverick, whom he personally installed as Moscow Party leader against considerable opposition from the Moscow Party organisation itself less than two years ago. If Eltsin does go Gorbachev's position will be significantly weakened.

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