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INFO PRIORITY WASHINGTON, UKDEL NATO, PARIS, BONN, EAS EUROPEAN POSTS
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MY TELNO 645: SOVIETSKAYA ROSSIYA AND PRAVDA: ROLE
OF THE LEADERSHIP

SUMMARY

1. REPORTS CIRCULATING IN MOSCOW HAVE IT THAT WHEN THE POLITBURO DISCUSSED PRAVDA'S RESPONSE TO THE SOVIETSKAYA ROSSIYA ARTICLE OF 13 MARCH GORBACHEV DEMANDED AND RECEIVED A VOTE OF CONFIDENCE IN HIMSELF, AND THAT THE MEETING APPROVED A WRITTEN CENSURE OF LIGACHEV (IN HIS ABSENCE). THIS INFORMATION IS OF UNPROVEN AUTHENTICITY BUT NOT INCONSISTENT WITH WHAT IS ALREADY KNOWN. IF TRUE, WE COULD EXPECT EVIDENCE TO EMERGE IN PUBLIC OF THIS SHARP TRANSFORMATION OF THE EXISTING DEBATE INTO A QUESTION OF PERSONAL AUTHORITY. A MOVE AGAINST LIGACHEV COULD BE ON THE CARDS.

DETAIL

2. SEVERAL WESTERN MISSIONS AND JOURNALISTS HAVE HEARD MORE DRAMATIC AND DETAILED VERSIONS OF THE POLITBURO'S REACTION TO THE SOVIETSKAYA ROSSIYA ARTICLE THAN THAT OFFERED IN MY TUR. ACCORDING TO THESE ACCOUNTS, FOR WHICH THERE APPEAR TO BE THREE SEPARATE IMMEDIATE SOURCES, A SPECIAL SESSION OF THE POLITBURO WAS SUMMONED ON 30 MARCH IN THE ABSENCE OF LIGACHEV (IN VOLOGDA, 28-30 MARCH). GORBACHEV REPORTEDLY SAID THAT HE WOULD ONLY CONTINUE TO SERVE IF HE HAD THE FULL SUPPORT OF THE POLITBURO AND ASKED ALL THOSE PRESENT TO STATE THEIR POSITION. ALL DECLARED THEIR SUPPORT, ALTHOUGH ONE SOURCE HAS IT THAT CHEBRIKOV DISSENTED. IN ADDITION TO AUTHORIZING THE PRAVDA ARTICLE THE POLITBURO THEN APPROVED A REBUKE TO LIGACHEV, WHICH ALL SIGNED, CALLING ON HIM TO DESIST FROM SUPPORTING THE CONSERVATIVE CAUSE AND INSTRUCTING HIM TO READ THE PARTY STATUTES IN CONNECTION WITH HIS RESPONSIBILITY AS A SECRETARY OF THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE.

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3. ANOTHER VERSION HAS IT THAT THERE WERE TWO EXTRAORDINARY POLITBURO SESSIONS: ONE, ON 30 MARCH, WHICH CENSURED LIGACHEV IN HIS ABSENCE, AND A SECOND, ON 4 APRIL, WHICH APPROVED THE FINAL DRAFT OF THE PRAVDA RESPONSE WITH LIGACHEV (PRESENT ON THIS OCCASION) AND CHEBRIKOV DISSENTING.

4. THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS STORY DEPENDS CRITICALLY ON ITS AUTHENTICITY, FOR WHICH WE CANNOT VOUCH. BUT TAKEN AT FACE VALUE:

- IT APPEARS THAT GORBACHEV CONSIDERED THE CHALLENGE REPRESENTED BY THE SOVIETSKAYA ROSSIYA ARTICLE WAS SUFFICIENTLY SERIOUS THAT HE HAD TO RESPOND BY ABRUPTLY TRANSFORMING THE ISSUE INTO ONE OF POLITICAL AUTHORITY SEMICOLON
- THE MANNER IN WHICH THIS EVENT IS SUPPOSED TO HAVE TAKEN PLACE, BEHIND LIGACHEV'S BACK, IS ITSELF A NEGATION OF DEMOCRATISATION AND GLASNOST. THIS COULD SUGGEST THAT GORBACHEV WAS UNSURE OF ACHIEVING THE SAME DEGREE OF SUPPORT IF LIGACHEV HAD BEEN THERE TO DEFEND HIS VIEWS, AND IS ITSELF A TRIBUTE TO THE STRENGTH OF THE CONSERVATIVE CONSTITUENCY SEMICOLON
- IT SHOULD BE BORNE IN MIND HOWEVER THAT ON MORE THAN ONE OCCASION, LIGACHEV HAS TAKEN ADVANTAGE OF GORBACHEV'S ABSENCE TO ADVANCE HIS OWN IDEAS SEMICOLON AND THAT THE SOVIETSKAYA ROSSIYA PIECE WAS TIMED TO APPEAR JUST AS GORBACHEV WAS DEPARTING FOR YUGOSLAVIA SEMICOLON

IT SEEMS UNLIKELY THAT WHAT IS TANTAMOUNT TO AN OFFER OF RESIGNATION BY THE GENERAL SECRETARY AND THE HUMILIATION OF THE SECOND MAN IN THE PARTY HIERARCHY COULD END HERE.

IF THE STORY IS TRUE LIGACHEV'S AUTHORITY WILL HAVE SUFFERED A SEVERE DENT, AND HIS DAYS IN HIS PRESENT NUMBER TWO-POST MIGHT BE NUMBERED. THERE HAVE IN THE PAST BEEN RUMOURS THAT HE WOULD SUCCEED GROMYKO AS HEAD OF STATE.

DID SUCH A CLASH TAKE PLACE?

5. MUCH OF THE STORY HAS STRONG CIRCUMSTANTIAL CREDIBILITY. LIGACHEV IS THE LEADING CONSERVATIVE PROTAGONIST IN A VISIBLE DIVISION OF OPINION IN THE LEADERSHIP WHICH IS DAMAGING THE CAUSE OF REFORM. THE EVIDENCE FOR HIS INVOLVEMENT IN SOME WAY

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IN THE SOVIETSKAYA ROSSIYA PIECE IS GENERALLY TAKEN HERE AS CONVINCING.

6., THE TIMING OF THE SOVIETSKAYA ROSSIYA PIECE WAS ALMOST CERTAINLY CALCULATED TO HAVE THE MAXIMUM INFLUENCE ON THE PREPARATIONS FOR THE PARTY CONFERENCE IN JUNE. ONE MAY QUESTION WHETHER THIS ATTEMPT TO MARSHAL SUPPORT FOR THE REACTIONARY TENDENCY WILL ACTUALLY INFLUENCE THE CONFERENCE AGENDA AND ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE CHOICE OF DELEGATES WHOSE ELECTION IS PENDING: BUT IT SEEMS LIKELY TO HAVE OFFERED REASSURANCE TO THOSE OF CONSERVATIVE VIEWS IN THE RANK AND FILE BUREAUCRACY THAT THEY HAVE SUPPORT AT THE CENTRE. AT THE SAME TIME, THE VIGOROUS RESPONSE FROM PRAVDA AND OTHER NEWSPAPERS WILL WARN THAT THE DRIVE FOR REAL REFORM RETAINS ITS MOMENTUM.

7. FOR THE REFORMERS, THEREFORE, THERE WAS GOOD REASON FOR FIRM ACTION TO ATTEMPT TO STOP THE SPREAD OF THE THINKING REPRESENTED BY THE SOVIETSKAYA ROSSIYA ARTICLE. THERE WOULD AT THE SAME TIME BE A STRONG INTEREST IN AVOIDING ANOTHER PUBLIC ROW SUCH AS THAT WHICH SURROUNDED THE REMOVAL OF ELTSIN. IN THIS CONTEXT A SHORT SHARP INTERNAL RAP OVER THE KNUCLES FOR LIGACHEV MAKES SENSE.

8. THE REFORMIST PRESS, PLUS PRAVDA, CONTINUED TO SUPPORT PRAVDA'S REBUTTAL OF SOVIETSKAYA ROSSIYA AND TO USE THE OPPORTUNITY TO PUSH FORWARD THEIR CAMPAIGN FOR GLASNOST AND POLITICAL REFORM. BUT, AS RECORDED IN MY TELNO 663 (NOT TO ALL) CHEBRIKOV IN A RECENT SPEECH DID NOT SHRINK FROM GIVING FULL WEIGHT TO THE CAUTIOUS APPROACH TO REFORM.

WHOSE INTERESTS DOES THE PUBLICATION (OR FABRICATION) OF THIS EPISODE SERVE?

9. ALTHOUGH, AS NOTED ABOVE, IT WAS PREFERABLE TO AVOID A PUBLIC CLASH, THE SALUTARY LESSON OF THE REBUKE TO LIGACHEV WOULD HAVE ONLY PARTIAL EFFECT IF ITS EXISTENCE WERE KNOWN ONLY TO THOSE DIRECTLY INVOLVED. DISCREET PUBLICITY WOULD SERVE AS A WARNING TO ALL THAT SERIOUS DISSENT WOULD NOT BE TOLERATED. THE SAME ARGUMENT CAN OF COURSE BE USED TO EXPLAIN THE CIRCULATION OF A FABRICATED STORY TO THE SAME EFFECT. THE FACT THAT THERE WAS GOOD REASON FOR GORBACHEV'S SUPPORTERS TO GIVE CURRENCY TO THE STORY OFFERS NO COMMENT ON ITS AUTHENTICITY.

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CONCLUSION

10. WESTERN REACTION HERE IS CAUTIOUS. IT IS NEVERTHELESS VERY LIKELY THAT THERE WAS SOME DIRECT TALKING IN THE POLITBURO AT THE TIME OF THE APPROVAL OF THE PRAVDA REPLY. BUT, PENDING ADDITIONAL INFORMATION, WE WOULD BE WISE TO TREAT THE DETAILS WITH CIRCUMSPECTION. IF THERE WAS INDEED A SHOWDOWN ON THE SCALE OUTLINED ABOVE, I BELIEVE THAT WE ARE LIKELY TO SEE PUBLIC EVIDENCE OF THIS BEFORE TOO LONG.

11. WHAT IS MORE IMPORTANT PERHAPS IN THE MEANTIME IS THAT, FOR THE PRESENT, THE VIEWS OF THE REFORMERS SEEM TO HAVE THE UPPER HAND AMONG THE LEADERSHIP. BUT AMONG THE RANK AND FILE, AND ESPECIALLY THOSE REMOTE FROM MOSCOW, THE STRENGTH OF THE REFORMIST CAUSE IS MUCH LESS IN EVIDENCE.

GORBACHEV WITH THE APPARENT SUPPORT OF THE LEADERSHIP, IS LOOKING TO RECEIVE AT THE PARTY CONFERENCE, IF NOT A DECISIVE MANDATE TO PRESS AHEAD WITH REFORMS AT LEAST A SUFFICIENT SUPPORT TO PURSUE THE PARTY'S PRESENT COURSE. FOR THIS REASON ALSO THE CONSERVATIVE TENDENCY KNOW THAT THE TIME REMAINING IN WHICH TO MOBILISE FORCES WHICH WOULD ACT AS A BRAKE AT THE PARTY CONFERENCE IS VERY SHORT.

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