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SOVIET INTERNAL SITUATION

There are interesting indications of internal opposition to perestroika and increasing gloom among Soviet leaders on the subject coming to us now.

Soviet Speeches

Soviet leaders are now openly admitting the existence of such opposition and abandoning their past pretence that it was only a form of passive resistance from the ranks of the Party and government bureaucracy and others who did well out of the old system. Among the examples are

- a) Yakovlev in an interview with Der Spiegel in January said that such vehement resistance to perestroika had not been expected. "We firmly believe that the conservative threat is the most serious threat to perestroika".
- b) Yakovlev in a speech at Perm in December said that if perestroika was defeated or failed "we could be threatened not only by return to the past, to the era of stagnation, but by an aggressive and vengeful conservatism, celebrating its victory".
- c) Gorbachev, speaking to the intellectuals on 6 January, warned that opponents on the right and the left, ie "conservatives" and "avant-garde", would find common purpose and join forces against the reforms.

- d) Politburo member, Vorotnikov in a speech in December said

"It would be an unforgivable delusion not to see that there are forces both to the right and to the left who speak out against perestroika. It is not only a question of stuffy bureaucrats. Opposition to perestroika is in evidence at every level: among the top administrators and in the middle levels of management, where people long ago got out of the habit of doing real work, and where the sense of responsibility has become atrophied. Such people are everywhere, in all sectors, but today we must restore order above all among the specialist cadres in the agro-industrial complex. To be honest, there are even people among the workers and peasantry who fail to comprehend the essence of perestroika".

- e) Medvedev, the Party's chief ideologist, in a speech in December spoke of a polarisation of opinions and of a serious danger presented by the "conservative-dogmatist" wing, who blamed economic reform, especially economic decentralisation and co-operatives, for current problems. He also singled out economic managers and specialists who did not want to work in the new way.

Opposition to glasnost and political reforms

The Party apparat is naturally resentful of these developments. Medvedev, in a speech in December, commented on the ambivalent attitude to glasnost among the Party. Vorotnikov accused Party organisations of dragging their feet over the political reforms. Yakovlev berated officials for their fear of democracy, glasnost and pluralism. In an interview in Pravda on 2 January, Onikov, a propaganda

worker in the Central Committee apparatus, spoke at some length about Party resistance to perestroika.

Opposition to Economic Reforms

This opposition is potentially the most serious threat, if we put aside the risk of an explosion among the nationalities. It takes various forms, ranging from simple human envy of the prosperity of others, to extreme Russian nationalist views, which reject the adoption of any western-style economic ideas, eg the market and material incentives, and claim that there is a purely Russian "spiritual" alternative. In between these extremes there is a broad band of distaste for what is seen as the self-enrichment by co-operatives through exploitation of an economy characterised by shortages. In addition it seems that people involved in the black market oppose the reforms and could be actively sabotaging them.

The reformist economist Shmelev has said recently that it was quite reasonable to suggest the establishment of small private businesses employing hired labour (still illegal in the Soviet Union). He added however that the first such business to start up would be burnt to the ground the next night by others in the same street. His assumption is based on the experience of many co-operatives: one pig farm was set on fire three times by local people who resented the high price of co-operative meat (even though there was none available from the state sector); ^{at} a meeting on agriculture on 13 January a former worker described how he and other lease-contract workers were attacked with knives by former colleagues on a collective farm.

The idea of co-operatives and of leasing has come under strong pressure from conservatives in the leadership. Ligachev, for example, has repeatedly made it clear that to him co-operatives are only acceptable as subordinate units

within a state enterprise or collective farm, but not as private or independent businesses. Zaikov, Moscow's First Party Secretary, seems to share these views. Recent restrictions have been introduced on both the range of the activities of co-operatives and the prices they charge.

There also seems to be a change of heart among reformist economists about retail price reforms. Many who previously strongly supported the need for the abolition of food subsidies and a rise in prices have developed cold feet because of the likelihood of a further drop in support for perestroika and possibly serious strikes. Gorbachev, however, indicated in his 6 January speech that he means to press ahead with price reform while ensuring that low income groups are properly compensated. It is doubtful whether this will be possible in practice.

In general the economy is in such a mess that whatever course of action is taken, matters are only likely to get worse before they can get better. A drop in living standards looks increasingly inevitable, in a society where living standards are already pitifully low and where, on Soviet admission, 43 million people are estimated to be living below the poverty line. The possibility of unemployment is widely feared. Promises of relocation of redundant workers remain unconvincing, given the chronic housing shortage in industrial areas.

In a review of economic progress since 1985, Ryzhkov on 14 January, only a few days before the poor grain harvest result was published, said that "the reform is proceeding very painfully, extremely painfully". He listed the current four most serious problems as: shortages of consumer goods and excess spending power; food shortages; the budget deficit; and growing international debt.

Loss of support among the intelligentsia

A further cause of concern for the leaders is the gradual loss of support from the intelligentsia. The writers have turned to increasingly vicious attacks on each other. These reflect a growing polarisation between reformists in the party and the hitherto silent majority, who are now capitalising on the lack of popular success of perestroika to accuse the leadership of abandoning socialism at home and abroad. While there is still little published material available, the strength of this attack can easily be deduced by Gorbachev's lengthy repudiations in his speech to the intellectuals of 6 January and at the Moscow Party Conference on 21 January.

Gorbachev's own position

As I have said in earlier minutes, Gorbachev's position is not immediately threatened. There is a clear lack of alternative policies and candidates. But he has not made the headway one would have expected following the partial eclipse of Ligachev. He may also have to consider certain concessions in order to strengthen his political position. As indicated above, the "quick fix" solutions of co-operatives and lease-contracting are running into trouble. The former are popularly seen as responsible for continuing shortages and rising prices. Gorbachev has not really stood out for them and new controls over them have been introduced. On the latter, ie leases, Gorbachev is currently giving the impression that, like Ligachev, he sees leasing as designed to operate strictly within the confines of state and collective farms. He earlier gave free run to the implication that they would supplant the old structures

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in all but name. Some of this manoeuvring could be tactical and we shall not get a clear view of the agricultural scene until the plenum on the subject in March. But Gorbachev is clearly under pressure.

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