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MY TELNO 558: GORBACHEV'S SPEECH TO THE MEDIA: ELECTIONS AND
AGRICULTURE: COMMENT

SUMMARY

1. IN THE FIRST LEADERSHIP COMMENT ON THE ELECTIONS GORBACHEV REASSURES THE PARTY THAT THERE IS TO BE NO MAJOR CHANGE OF DIRECTION. THE PARTY APPARATUS WILL HAVE TO DRAW THE LESSONS FROM ELECTORAL DEFEATS AND PUT ITS OWN HOUSE IN ORDER. THE OPENING OF THE CONGRESS OF PEOPLES' DEPUTIES AND THE SUPREME SOVIET TO BE POSTPONED FOR A MONTH. ANOTHER ATTEMPT TO DEFINE AGRICULTURAL POLICY.

DETAIL

ELECTIONS

2. WHILE THE FRONT PAGES OF WESTERN NEWSPAPERS HAVE BEEN FILLED WITH COMMENTARIES ON LAST SUNDAY'S ELECTION RESULTS, THE SOVIET PRESS, DESPITE GLASNOST, HAS BEEN LARGELY SILENT. THEY HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR GUIDANCE FROM ABOVE. THIS SPEECH OF GORBACHEV'S WAS THEREFORE EAGERLY AWAITED AS THE FIRST INDICATION OF LEADERSHIP REACTION TO THE RESULTS. GORBACHEV STRESSED IN HIS SPEECH THAT THIS WAS ONLY A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT: THE RESULTS HAVE NOT YET FULLY STUDIED. NEVERTHELESS, THE SPEECH FOLLOWS A POLITBURO DISCUSSION ON 28 MARCH AND PRESUMABLY THEREFORE REFLECTS A GENERAL LEADERSHIP CONSENSUS.

3. NATURALLY ENOUGH, GORBACHEV INTERPRETS THE ELECTIONS AS A VICTORY FOR PERESTROIKA AND DEMOCRATISATION. ACTIVE POPULAR PARTICIPATION IS SEEN AS FURTHER EVIDENCE THAT THE PEOPLE ARE BEHIND PERESTROIKA. NEVERTHESS, THE TONE OF THE SPEECH IS NOTICEABLY DEFENSIVE. IT IS DESIGNED TO REASSURE THE PARTY AND WARN OTHERS THAT, HOWEVER SURPRISING THE RESULTS, THERE IS TO BE NO MAJOR CHANGE IN POLICY. HE DWELLS AT SOME LENGTH ON THE NEED FOR THE PARTY TO CONTINUE TO PLAY ITS LEADING ROLE IN PROMOTING PERESTROIKA. HE WARNS AGAINST CONTINUED DISCUSSION OF MULTI-PARTY SYSTEMS, AND REFERS TO THE NEED

TO DEFEND PERESTROIKA FROM DEMAGOGUES AND ANTI-SOVIET ELEMENTS. ELTSIN IS NOT MENTIONED ONCE.

4. ON THE SENSITIVE ISSUE OF WHAT IS TO HAPPEN TO THE NUMEROUS PARTY LEADERS WHO FELL FOUL OF THE ELECTORATE, GORBACHEV IS CAREFULLY VAGUE. HE NOTES THAT THE REGIONS WHERE THERE WERE PROBLEMS WERE THOSE WHERE PERESTROIKA WAS NOT MOVING FAST ENOUGH. THOSE WHO HAD FAILED TO GET ELECTED SHOULD NOT TAKE TRAGEDY OUT OF THIS. THEY SHOULD HOWEVER, DRAW THE APPROPRIATE LESSONS. THE MESSAGE SEEMS TO BE THAT LOCAL PARTIES ARE TO BE LEFT TO PUT THEIR OWN HOUSES IN ORDER: ELECTION FAILURES ARE NOT TO BE USED AS AN EXCUSE FOR FORCING THROUGH A WIDE-RANGING PURGE OF THE REGIONAL PARTY APPARATUS FROM THE CENTRE. GORBACHEV AND THE PARTY APPARATUS WILL BE WELL AWARE THAT THEY HAVE TO FACE ANOTHER ROUND OF LOCAL AND REPUBLIC LEVEL ELECTIONS IN THE AUTUMN AND THAT IF PERSONNEL AND POLICY CHANGES ARE NOT MADE MANY PARTY ORGANISATIONS WILL FACE FURTHER AND MORE FAR-REACHING ELECTORAL EMBARRASMENTS.

5. GORBACHEV CONFIRMS IN THIS SPEECH THAT THE NEED TO ORGANISE A LARGE NUMBER OF REPEAT ELECTIONS WILL REQUIRE A POSTPONEMENT OF THE FIRST MEETING OF THE CONGRESS OF PEOPLES DEPUTIES. MOST OF THE RE-RUN ELECTIONS ARE TO TAKE PLACE ON 14 MAY. THIS SUGGESTS THAT THE CONGRESS IS LIKELY TO MEET IN THE SECOND HALF OF MAY.

AGRICULTURE

6. DESPITE LIGACHEV'S ATTEMPT TO PAPER OVER THE CRACKS AT HIS PRESS CONFERENCE AFTER THE RECENT PLENUM (OUR TELNO 472) WE ARE STILL HEARING REPORTS OF CONTINUING LEADERSHIP DIFFERENCES ON AGRICULTURAL POLICY. THE DOCUMENTS FROM THE PLENUM HAVE STILL NOT BEEN PUBLISHED. THIS SUGGESTS THERE HAS BEEN MORE HAGGLING. GORBACHEV SAYS IN THIS SPEECH THAT THEY WILL BE PUBLISHED SHORTLY.

7. MOST OF HIS COMMENTS ON AGRICULTURE ARE A RE-HASH OF HIS PLENUM SPEECH. HIS PURPOSE IN REVERTING TO THIS SUBJECT SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN TO TRY TO LAY DOWN CLEAR GUIDELINES AS TO WHAT LEADERSHIP POLICY ON AGRICULTURE NOW IS - PARTICULARLY ON THE VEXED ISSUE OF LEASING. ON THE KEY POINT ABOUT WHAT TO DO ABOUT LOSS-MAKING FARMS, GORBACHEV TRIES TO STEER A MIDDLE COURSE.

HE REJECTS THE IDEA OF CONTINUING SUBSIDIES - THE LIGACHEV LINE. BUT HE RESERVES HIS STRONGEST LANGUAGE FOR THOSE JOURNALISTS AND ECONOMISTS WHO CONTINUE TO ADVOCATE THE IMMEDIATE DISMANTLING OF THESE FARMS AND THEIR HANDING OVER TO LEASEHOLDERS. ONE CANNOT, HE

SAYS, SIMPLY DISREGARD THE INTERESTS OF THE PEOPLE INVOLVED NOR THE FACT THAT THESE FARMS ACCOUNT FOR ABOUT 20% OF AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION. HE SAYS, AS HE DID IN HIS PLENUM SPEECH, THAT THERE WILL BE SOME CASES WHEN COLLECTIVE FARMS HAVE TO BE EITHER MERGED OR GIVEN OVER TO LEASEHOLDERS. THE MAIN WAY FORWARD MUST BE TO REDUCE SUBSIDIES BY ENCOURAGING THE FARMS TO BE MORE EFFICIENT. HOWEVER, HE HAS NO MORE CONVINCING ARGUMENTS AS TO HOW THIS MIGHT BE DONE THAT HE HAD AT THE PLENUM.

8. THERE IS NO EVIDENCE IN THIS SPEECH THAT GORBACHEV IS INTENDING TO CAPITALISE ON LIGACHEV'S POST-ELECTION DISCOMFITURE TO FORCE THROUGH A MORE RADICAL RESTRUCTURING OF THE COLLECTIVE SYSTEM: BUT A FINAL VERDICT ON THIS WILL HAVE TO WAIT UNTIL WE SEE THE PLENUM DOCUMENTS AND THE DRAFT LAW ON LEASING.

BRAITHWAITE

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