

Sir Robin

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Soviet Central Committee Plenum

Yesterday's Plenum resulted in the removal from the Party's Central Committee and Auditing Commission of nearly all the officially designated pensioners on those bodies (some were said to have been too ill to sign the common address of resignation). The figures are: 74 resignations of full members of the Central Committee (out of a total of 301); 24 candidate members (out of 157), and 12 members of the Auditing Commission (out of 82).


2. The reason why there were so many pensioners in the Party's leading policy-making bodies in the first place lies in the fact that the Central Committee and Auditing Commission are elected at Party Congresses. The latest Party Congress took place in February/March 1986, when Gorbachev had been in power for less than a year and was not strong enough to dispose of all the Brezhnev era officials. Since then, he has achieved the retirement of most of them. But apart from a few who have been expelled from the Central Committee because they have been facing criminal charges, loss of job has not entailed loss of Central Committee status. The Central Party bodies have thus been peopled with an increasing number of "dead souls". Gorbachev wanted the Party Conference in June/July 1988 to rectify this situation, but, as he acknowledged yesterday, the idea was rejected.

3. In place of the 110 removed, a mere 24 have been promoted from candidate to full membership of the Central Committee. The reason again lies in the Party Rules, which allow for such promotions between Congresses, but not for the co-opting of new members from outside the existing

Central Committee. The promotees include some undoubted supporters of Gorbachev, particularly in the foreign affairs field, but also some token workers, one of whom was among those attacking Eltsin at the last Plenum and is probably not well-disposed towards Gorbachev.

4. Gorbachev has been hinting since January that a Plenum was due in April, but had previously linked it with the forthcoming Congress of People's Deputies, which has now been postponed till late May. He may, therefore, have exploited the opportunity to hold a different Plenum from the one originally envisaged in order to force through the radical pruning of the Central Committee which he has long desired. The Party's poor showing at the recent elections will have given him the necessary ammunition.

5. The changes strengthen Gorbachev's position. They have eliminated the latent possibility of the remaining Brezhnevites mounting a coup against him in the Central Committee. But Gorbachev will still have to wait till the next Party Congress (due in 1991) before he can radically revamp the Central Committee. Whether the rejuvenation and slimming down of the Party's leading bodies will have a palpable effect on the popular view of the Party remains to be seen. Gorbachev's similar exercise last September, when he removed the elderly from the top leadership, did not have much effect on popular perceptions, to judge by the election results.



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