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NEWS FOCUS
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BY CORD MEYER

TOUGH CHOICES FOR BREZHNEV'S SUCCESSOR

WASHINGTON -- ONE CLEAR SIGNAL THAT LEONID BREZHNEV'S DAYS MAY BE NUMBERED AS GENERAL SECRETARY OF THE SOVIET COMMUNIST PARTY IS THE WIDENING SPREAD OF RUMORS ABOUT THE SUCCESSION COMING FROM WELL-PLACED SOURCES IN MOSCOW.

AFTER FRUITLESSLY STUDYING FOR YEARS THE INPENETRABLE FACADE OF THE KREMLIN FOR FISSURES IN ITS POWER STRUCTURE, BOTH AMERICAN AND EUROPEAN EXPERTS ARE SUDDENLY SWAMPED WITH HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL GOSSIP THAT INDICATES BREZHNEV'S POTENTIAL SUCCESSORS HAVE BEGUN TO JOCKEY FOR POSITION. "THEY ARE FEEDING THE RUMOR MILLS TO LINE UP SUPPORT" IS THE CONCLUSION OF A HIGH-RANKING AMERICAN INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL.

TYPICAL IS A REPORT FROM A WELL-POSITIONED FRENCH SOURCE THAT CLAIMS YURI ANDROPOV, THE KGB CHIEF, IS CONSPIRING WITH THE SOVIET MILITARY TO BLOCK BREZHNEV'S PREFERRED CANDIDATE, KONSTANTIN CHERNENKO. CHARGES THAT BREZHNEV IS BECOMING INCREASINGLY SENILE ARE DRAMATIZED BY STORIES THAT HE IS REGULARLY CONSULTING A WOMAN HYPNOTIST, DESCRIBED AS A FEMALE RASPUTIN.

RECOGNIZING THAT IT HAS A POOR TRACK RECORD IN PREDICTING THE FINAL OUTCOME OF RUSSIAN POWER STRUGGLES, THE CIA IS NOT ATTEMPTING TO PICK THE ULTIMATE WINNER, BUT BELIEVES THAT ONE OF BREZHNEV'S OLD CRONIES LIKE CHERNENKO IS LIKELY TO SERVE AS AN INTERIM CARETAKER WHILE THE REAL FIGHT FOR THE LONG-TERM SUCCESSION TAKES PLACE BETWEEN YOUNGER MEN.

IF THE IDENTITY OF BREZHNEV'S EVENTUAL SUCCESSOR IS IN DOUBT, THE PROBLEMS HE WILL FACE ARE NOT. IN FACT, BLOATED MILITARY EXPENDITURES, DECLINING PRODUCTIVITY AND DISASTROUS AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES PRESENT WHOEVER RULES RUSSIA WITH SO MANY APPALLING DIFFICULTIES AND DILEMMAS THAT NO RATIONAL PERSON WOULD WANT THE JOB.

CONSIDER FOR EXAMPLE THE BASIC DIFFICULTY OF PROVIDING THE SOVIET POPULATION THIS YEAR WITH AN ADEQUATE FOOD SUPPLY. ALTHOUGH MOSCOW HAS ATTEMPTED TO KEEP SECRET THE FIGURES FOR 1981 GRAIN PRODUCTION, THEY ARE BEGINNING TO LEAK OUT IN PUBLIC STATEMENTS BY LOWER-RANKING OFFICIALS. U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE EXPERTS NOW AGREE THAT LAST YEAR'S RUSSIAN GRAIN OUTPUT WAS ABOUT 60 MILLION TONS BELOW THE PLANNED TARGET.

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