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CIA/CPAS | NIDC 85-095C

National Intelligence Daily

Wednesday
24 April 1985

Cable

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24 April 1985~~

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Special Analysis

BULGARIA:

Growing Problems for Zhivkov

Bulgarian party leader Zhivkov, 74, is facing one of the most difficult periods in the four decades of his rule. [REDACTED]

After several years of relative prosperity and stability for the nation, the regime is increasingly worried about economic problems, international reaction against its brutal repression of ethnic Turks, and the prospect that the coming trial in Rome of the Bulgarian, Sergei Antonov, accused of conspiring to murder the Pope, may further damage its reputation abroad. [REDACTED]

The Antonov Affair

With the opening of Antonov's trial scheduled for 27 May in Rome, Sofia is bracing for more bad publicity in the course of what are expected to be long proceedings. The regime is concerned that the trial will expose its involvement in espionage and international arms and drug trafficking as well as further embroil it in the papal case. The Bulgarians are apparently preparing to stage a countertrial in Sofia designed to debunk the testimony of accused assailant Agca and implicate the CIA in a complex plot to discredit Bulgaria. [REDACTED]

Campaign Against Ethnic Turks

The violent repression of Bulgaria's Turkish minority is drawing criticism not only from Islamic countries and the West but also from Bulgaria's allies in the Warsaw Pact. [REDACTED] the Soviets expressed strong disapproval of the handling of the campaign when Zhivkov made a secret visit to Moscow in February. [REDACTED]

Zhivkov reportedly was told that the repression was seriously complicating Pact relations with Balkan states outside the Pact. One East European diplomat privately called it "unfortunate" that the campaign was taking place at a time when the USSR was trying to improve relations with the US. [REDACTED]

While prepared to withstand criticism from abroad, Bulgarian officials probably are disturbed by indications of more concrete repercussions. Turkish Prime Minister Ozal has scrapped tentative plans to visit Bulgaria. Turkey, moreover, is rallying support among Islamic countries to move UNESCO's general conference from Sofia this fall—an action that Zhivkov would see as a blow to his prestige. [REDACTED]

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In addition to at least four confirmed reports of bombings in Bulgaria, moreover, the repression issue has provoked at least three bomb threats against Bulgarian commercial missions abroad and several protest demonstrations in Western capitals. The latter probably were organized by Turkish and Islamic groups. [REDACTED]

Economic Problems

While Bulgaria's economic situation is still better than that in most countries in Eastern Europe, new problems have arisen. Food supplies reportedly have declined in the past year. [REDACTED] says drought conditions are causing damage to Bulgaria's winter wheat, an important export to the USSR and to hard currency markets. Low reservoirs are reducing hydroelectric power adding to the problem of low industrial production caused by the unusually harsh conditions this past winter. [REDACTED]

The regime has responded by encouraging conservation of water and energy—limited blackouts for households—and by ordering enterprises to work an additional day each week. Stiff penalties are being levied against wasteful energy and water users, and the increasingly stringent austerity measures are likely to cause resentment. [REDACTED]

Prospects

Now Eastern Europe's senior party leader, Zhivkov has depended on close relations with Moscow, improving living standards, domestic stability, and his own charisma. The setbacks he has suffered may be having an adverse impact on his health. [REDACTED]

Diplomatic observers in Sofia suggest Zhivkov is not as vigorous or alert as he was last year. His political position still seems secure, but the new Soviet leadership probably will be watching carefully in the months ahead for any further signs that his grip is loosening. [REDACTED]

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