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SPECIAL ANALYSES

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USSR: Prospect for Policy Change After Brezhnev

by [REDACTED] CIA

*President Brezhnev's departure from the political scene will loosen pent-up forces for change. The fragile collective of senior leaders likely to be in charge probably will not agree on how to handle the country's deep-seated problems, and no single leader will initially possess the power to push through a distinctive program. This caretaker regime might soon give way to a new group of leaders prepared to act more forcefully in an attempt to rejuvenate the system.*

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The regime faces perhaps the most serious combination of foreign and domestic challenges since World War II. The leadership's failure to tackle these problems head on has resulted in increased tensions in the party elite and Soviet society. The major pressure points are:

- The economic slowdown, which has been aggravated by three consecutive bad harvests, has led to greater consumer assertiveness and heightened competition for resources between regions and sectors of the economy.
- The Polish liberalization movement, which has further strained Soviet resources, posed a fundamental threat to Soviet domination of Eastern Europe and raised questions about the leadership's resolve.
- The ossification of policymaking and the slow rate of promotions, which have probably frustrated the younger generation of party workers.

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As these pressures intensify, Brezhnev's heirs are likely to be faced with demands for the adoption of more energetic policies.

Policy Disputes Probable

In this environment, the potential for conflict over policy will be high. The desire of individual

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Politburo members to win allies may override their common interest in maintaining unity and in confining policy debate to the Politburo. As Brezhnev's associates jockey for position and seek support from important interest groups, several fundamental policy questions are likely to be at issue. [REDACTED]

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Some would-be successors to Brezhnev will favor relying more heavily on coercion to control consumer and labor restiveness. Others may prefer more conciliatory measures, including increased investment in the consumer sector and limited institutional reform, to make the system more responsive to the public. [REDACTED]

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In addition, some leaders may argue for a less ambitious foreign policy and for reductions in defense spending, in order to concentrate on internal economic development while acquiring Western technology and trade. Others may urge the use of military power and a more assertive role abroad to compensate for domestic failings and to secure needed resources. [REDACTED]

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Arguments also will be made for stronger appeals to Russian nationalism. These will be opposed by those favoring increased attention to the economic, cultural, and political interests of the minority nationalities, who resent Russian domination. [REDACTED]

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As differences over these issues are debated, new political alignments may emerge, resulting in some policy changes. If Kirilenko succeeds Brezhnev as general secretary, for example, he will probably try to secure support for increased investment in heavy industry at the expense of agriculture, which Brezhnev has championed. [REDACTED]

#### Sticking to the Status Quo

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Radical changes in policy, however, are unlikely in the first few months. There are no quick and easy solutions to major Soviet problems, and the leadership probably recognizes this. [REDACTED]

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The decisionmaking process has become more orderly and dependent on balancing entrenched bureaucratic and political interests than was the case 20 years ago. Policy formulation is more subject to institutional routine, and this may limit an individual leader's room for maneuver and produce compromise measures rather than bold innovations. [REDACTED]

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Brezhnev's replacement will not inherit all of his power. The collective leadership probably will put restraints on the new general secretary's authority and almost certainly will prevent him from becoming president. [REDACTED]

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Neither Kirilenko, Chernenko, nor any other potential successor has a large personal following that can be counted on to support his policies. The constraints that exist against the more blatant forms of patronage will make it difficult for the new general secretary to build a powerful political machine quickly. [REDACTED]

#### Situations Conducive to Rapid Change

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If, however, large numbers of high officials were to leave office over a short time--a distinct possibility in view of the advanced age of the Soviet elite--the process of generational renewal would accelerate and the chances for significant policy change would increase. Younger men possibly more inclined toward change would have more influence. A large turnover also would improve the new general secretary's opportunity to place his supporters in important positions, strengthening his ability to secure the adoption of his policies. [REDACTED]

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Any sudden adverse development, such as a significant increase in the level of popular unrest in the USSR or a worsening of the situation in Poland, also could impel Brezhnev's remaining colleagues to undertake a radical reorientation of policy. It seems more likely, however, that such a crisis would hasten their replacement by a younger and more vigorous group of leaders better able and more willing to chart a new course. [REDACTED]

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