



OFFICE OF  
NATIONAL ESTIMATES

## MEMORANDUM

*Soviet Politics and Policy: The Next Phase*

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21 April 1970

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# CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

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### MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Soviet Politics and Policy: The Next Phase\*

### SUMMARY

By year's end the Soviet collective leadership will have been in power more than six years. There have been, of course, moments of tension and conflict within the Politburo, and these have been, from time to time, visible from the outside. Sources of stress are present now. This paper takes a look at some of the elements in the present pattern of politics and policies in an attempt to discover whether the time for change is edging closer. It concludes that it is. Age and infirmity seem certain to take their toll. But the state of the economy could also provide the catalyst for more important changes. Problems in international politics or domestic disaffection might not in themselves be determining factors in changing the composition of the leadership, but they might have contributed to tensions within it.

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1. There will be, during the remainder of this year, three major state occasions in Moscow: the celebration on April 22 of the 100th anniversary of Lenin's birth (and some time soon, probably, a plenary meeting of the party Central Committee); quadrennial elections to the Supreme Soviet in June; and in the fall the 24th Party Congress. Each will produce great volumes of rhetoric and will be valued by the regime for its morale-building function, but they could also be the vehicles through which changes in leadership or policy could first manifest themselves.

2. There has been no formal announcement that the Party Congress is to take place or when. The announcement could come at the Central Committee meeting, which may in addition be given a preview of the new Five Year Plan (1971-75). The Committee meeting thus will be the opening act of a political ritual culminating at the Congress. There, the Five Year Plan will be approved and a new Central Committee will be chosen, which will in turn formally reconstitute the Politburo and the party Secretariat.

3. Barring a major upheaval in its ranks, the Politburo will not in any true sense be submitting itself to election by the Central Committee which will be named at

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the Party Congress, nor will the wishes of the Congress determine who will be appointed to the Central Committee and who will not. Nevertheless, for reasons having to do with the patronage system and because higher authority needs the active support of the less powerful bodies in securing the execution of its policies, it matters to members of the Politburo who the delegates to the Congress are and who is appointed to the new Central Committee. It matters to the Politburo also that the policies it exposes to them should obtain, to the greatest extent possible, their willing approval. Between now and the opening of the Congress, the effort to produce a suitable outcome in both regards will get considerable attention from the Politburo and may sharpen political rivalries.

#### Problems in Search of Solutions

4. In the last couple of years much discussion among Western students of the USSR has centered on whether the Soviet political structure, highly bureaucratized and based on an ideology which is a waning motive force, will be able to cope with the problems it is likely to come up against in the next decade or two. The chief problem, broadly put, is the problem of adaptation to technological change, of

economic and social modernization. Will the system, more or less in its present form, manage to stagger along? Will it, instead, have to reform itself drastically? Or will it -- failing that -- face stagnation, degeneration or convulsion?

5. There are some who think that muddling through is possible. But there is no one who thinks that the present leaders are capable of undertaking radical renovation. This, if it comes, will have to be undertaken by a new generation of leaders. Still, the present leaders have given evidence by their actions, and even more by their expressions of concern, that they perceive the general problem, if not the solutions to it. The issues posed by the avowed and worrisome lag in the rate of introduction of new technology into the Soviet economy, by stultifying managerial practices, and by various manifestations of sagging public discipline are real and present ones. And they are bound to figure to some degree in the proceedings at the upcoming Congress and to bear on decisions affecting economic allocations and perhaps also on appointments to key positions ratified there.

6. In these circumstances a number of questions suggest themselves. Has the unity of the Politburo already come under stress, as some published rumors would have it? If

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so, are significant changes in the leading policy-making bodies likely to be revealed either before or at the Party Congress? Changed or unchanged, what can the Politburo claim as its record in domestic and foreign policy? Is it likely to propose innovations in either of those areas?

Prospects for Change in Top Bodies

7. Useful hard intelligence on the state of play of Kremlin politics, is, as it has always been, rare; "Kremlinology" cannot be counted upon as a reliable guide. It should be possible, even so, to describe some of the reasons why some turnover in the Politburo and the other leading organs might be expected, though surmises about who might be involved are more hazardous. Some of the issues of policy which might contribute to tensions can be identified, but we have no good basis for conjecture about how individual issues, particularly those on the foreign policy side, affect particular political relationships. It is more difficult still to assess how this or that change in the face of the leadership might affect policy, domestic or foreign.

8. The durability of collective leadership as such and the continuity of the collective's membership are by now often-remarked, but still remarkable facts. A few

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statistics to remind: among the 11 full members of the Politburo formed immediately after Khrushchev's overthrow there have been only two subtractions, Mikoyan and Shvernik, both of whom, it seems, were permitted to go into honorable retirement; and two additions, one of the latter having been moved up from candidate status. Of the candidate members of the Politburo, only one has been demoted within the same span. There has been a good deal more turnover within the Secretariat, the third top group, but four of the present ten secretaries have been in place all the way.

9. By any reckoning this is a high degree of stability. It could not possibly have been accomplished except on the basis of some kind of conscious, if tacit, moratorium on normal turnover and normal political competition among the 25-30 men involved. It is conceivable that an oligarchic arrangement can be maintained for some time. But it is not conceivable that the individual forbearance, unenforced and unenforceable, which has produced this much continuity, can endlessly rise above the political antagonisms and policy conflicts which must inevitably occur. It is improbable, also, that the collective leadership (full Politburo only), having now an average age of 61 plus, can go on defying the actuarial laws.



10. There are other ways in which time may have worked to fray the fabric of collective stability. If four years ago, at the last party Congress, the leadership could claim success merely for having cleaned up the mess left behind by Khrushchev, the record of accomplishments and failures on which it now stands is its own and nobody else's. The practice of collective decision-making, though it has provided the political safety which comes from the diffusion of responsibility, must have seemed often a poor mechanism for incisive action. And consensus-making seems certain to have been frequently abrasive, despite the generally well-maintained appearance of unity.

11. The collective process must have been especially painful in the months leading up to the invasion of Czechoslovakia and again during the long period when Moscow was trying to decide whether and how to approach SALT. The first issue may have lost some of its sharp edge but the second no doubt remains a focal point of debate and tension. Policy toward China, in the Middle East, and vis-a-vis Germany presumably also give rise to difficult deliberations. But it is probably as true now as in the past that domestic issues provide the readiest weapons when the political contest

reaches a peak, even though many other issues may have helped to bring it to that point. The big domestic issues at this stage are the state of the economy and the temper of public morale.

#### The State of the Economy

12. It is evident that such increases in output as were to be had from the modifications in industrial and agricultural policy introduced by the collective leadership during its first two years have already been extracted. Published figures on economic results for 1969 suggest, in fact, that a point of diminishing returns in key growth rates may have been reached. These figures record that the rate of growth of industrial production last year was the lowest since the end of World War II. Targets for output in several key categories, such as steel production, were not met, and housing construction continues to fall behind plan. Agricultural output actually declined; even Moscow is currently experiencing a meat shortage, suggesting that more parlous conditions prevail in the rest of the country. Another cause for concern is the unsatisfactory rate of growth of labor productivity amidst conditions of a shortage of industrial labor.

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13. The regime may be able to ameliorate some of these immediate problems. Official figures for the first quarter of 1970 point to some recovery in growth rates. It is also true that especially bad weather had something to do with last year's poor showing in agriculture. Beyond these problems, in any case, lies the larger question of whether the regime can find ways to increase the effectiveness of investment, which has tended to decline in recent years. It is acknowledged also that Soviet industry, if it is going to serve the needs of the state, must henceforth concentrate on increasing the quality of its product, not just the volume. The more rapid introduction of advanced technology, new modes of industrial management, and the infusion of greater diligence into the labor force are seen as essential to the achievement of this aim. Yet, the present leadership has given no sign that it has any answer other than continuation of the 1965 mini-reform, more exhortation, and tighter discipline. At the Collective Farm Congress last year the regime passed up an opportunity to sanction a modest innovation in the organization of agricultural labor. On the industrial front, it has shown some favor for the so-called Shchekino experiment (which gives plant managers authority

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to reduce their labor force and to use the savings to increase the wages of the remaining force), but has, so far, come up with no other new ideas. The devolution of managerial authority and the fuller use of profit incentives remain anathema for both bureaucratic and ideological reasons.

Dissent, Protest, and Alienation

14. When exhortation is the order of the day, faults which are endemic but ignored at other times tend to be exaggerated. That may be happening now. Lack of drive, absenteeism, drunkenness, and inertia within the labor force are not new phenomena in the USSR; the regime has considered it necessary at regular intervals to organize public campaigns to combat them. Now, with the economy faltering, this kind of effort seems less likely than before to produce the desired results, pointing up the declining susceptibility of the Soviet population to the stimulus of propaganda slogans. While the conspicuous alienation of youth comparable to that apparent in Western countries has not yet appeared, many Soviet youths have clearly demonstrated a tendency toward disengagement from, or disenchantment with, the state's objectives.

15. The dissident currents running through the Soviet intelligentsia give the problem a further dimension. Though manifested in various ways -- protest demonstrations, carefully formulated letters to the authorities from celebrated citizens, underground literature -- the dissent from the prevailing practices of the Soviet state rests on a demand for fuller civil rights and broader intellectual freedom. The most trenchant and carefully articulated statements of dissent have come in two essays -- one addressed to the leadership, but no doubt widely circulated in intellectual circles as well -- by the distinguished physicist, Andrei Sakharov.

16. It is difficult to gauge in practical terms what impact dissent is having or is likely to have and how far it will go. In dealing with it the regime is not going to be much influenced by foreign opprobrium, though this may result in some reduction in the severity of repression. Present methods of dealing with the problem -- imprisonment, exile, lunacy proceedings, administrative penalties, and social ostracism -- may continue to work. They may not. The leadership must be especially disquieted by the knowledge that unhealthy ideas are abroad in the scientific community where they cannot be written off as the ravings

of cranks or rag-tag intellectuals, and where their spread could obviously greatly harm the interests of the state.

17. It would be surprising if the present leadership were much moved by Sakharov's warning that it would be suicidal to allow the gap between the regime and the intelligentsia to grow. There is some reason to suppose that the exponents of moderate liberalism in cultural policy have enjoyed some support at the highest level, but this support obviously has not been vigorously asserted. There may be, in addition, a little sympathy in high places for the notion that the quest for technological progress will require some real reform of economic structures. But even if some in the leadership might sense that the present course will merely store up problems for the future there must be nearly unanimous agreement that the kind of progressive views expressed by Sakharov cannot be countenanced. It is difficult to imagine, for instance, there being more than one view in the Kremlin about the acceptability of Sakharov's appeal for the lifting of censorship, his charge that the USSR is being dragged down by corruptions of the Communist system, and his call for an end to arbitrariness, by which he clearly means the regime's right to ignore even its own laws.

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The USSR's International Position -- Favorable Factors

18. Of the delegates to the party Congress in the fall, the great majority will be preoccupied with domestic issues: the provincial party secretary interested in inner party politics, the marshal concerned about arms policy, the plant director who wants to know what the Five Year Plan will entail for his operations, the KGB official who worries about "alien" influences, the chairman of a city soviet who wonders if there will be new funds for housing construction, and so on. But this varied constituency will also need to be told what is being done to protect the USSR's security interests and in general how well it goes for the USSR abroad. On this, the leadership can express a guarded optimism. It can claim that it has steadily strengthened the Soviet international position in important ways, while, at the same time, it has, by and large, stayed out of serious scrapes by looking before it leaped. It can say this without perjuring itself and, indeed, measured by its own conservative standards, the present position must seem to the leadership on the whole not acutely uncomfortable.

19. While the Chinese problem remains one of the most difficult the Soviet leadership has to grapple with, the

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leadership can claim that the USSR is better off than it was a year ago after the Ussuri incidents. By administering the Chinese a sharp rebuff on Damansky Island and by the application of other pressures, they have managed to bring the Chinese into a discussion of substantive issues at a respectably high level for the first time since early in 1964. They have to some degree also shored up their diplomatic position on other fronts by stemming what was becoming a growing belief that they were virtually handcuffed by the China problem. In many parts of the world they will receive credit for having combined statesmanship with firmness in dealing with the Chinese, while, at home, they have the use of a well-nigh universally popular nationalist cause.

20. From the Soviet point of view, the trend of events in Vietnam has been generally favorable. Developments can be seen as moving in a direction which will vindicate the assistance and advice Moscow has given Hanoi and obviate the possibility of a deeper Soviet military involvement, while bringing no particular advantage to the Chinese. At the same time, the prospect of a change in the role of the US in Asia has set Moscow to pondering the shape of its own future in that area. With Brezhnev's statement last



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summer about the desirability of organizing a system of collective security for Asia, Moscow has implied more active involvement but has as yet put only a very timid toe in the water.

21. To the west, the Soviets have succeeded in reducing Czechoslovakia to something like its former subservience. They have good reason to suppose that, because of their display of power, they are not likely soon again to face in Eastern Europe the kind of challenge to their authority and security they perceived in the Czechoslovak reform movement. The outbreak of polycentric turbulence among Communist parties, particularly those of Western Europe, which the invasion of Czechoslovakia provoked, has since largely subsided. These parties are, in any case, of diminishing importance to Moscow as instruments of foreign policy. The World Communist Conference in Moscow last June, though no pilgrims' chorus, signified that Moscow remains the nominal capital of international Communism, whatever that means and whatever it is worth.

22. They have discovered, moreover, that their invasion of Czechoslovakia only momentarily quelled the craving in

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Western Europe for detente. Their proposal for a European security conference is meant, in the first place, to exploit this craving in a way which would contribute further to tranquilizing their western marches by securing acknowledgement of their right to domination in Eastern Europe. They hope also, via the detente route, to obtain some of the benefits for the East European states and for themselves of Western Europe's economic and technical attainments and to foster any tendencies in Western Europe toward greater independence of the US. Moscow's probing of the possibilities to be found in West Germany's Ostpolitik is governed by the same motives but has the more particular goal of moving West Germany toward acknowledgement of the Oder-Neisse line and recognition of East Germany.

23. A judgment that the US is moving toward a contraction of its foreign commitments in Europe, as elsewhere, has also no doubt had something to do with the reactivation of the USSR's European diplomacy. It may be that, on some sort of rough calculation, Moscow reckons that the Chinese cancer and the debility of its economy are to some extent offset by domestic social and economic problems on the US side. The leadership has, in the meantime, brought the USSR to approximate parity in nuclear strength with the US. This

accomplishment has enabled the USSR to negotiate from a position of equality in SALT which might, in its turn, help to ease the burden of arms competition for the USSR. SALT signifies, in addition, that relations with the US are being kept within the framework of "peaceful coexistence." On that basis, the political contest with the US is being carried on in many areas. Nowhere is the increase in the USSR's influence more apparent than in the Middle East.

International Position: Complications

24. Nowhere, at the same time, does the USSR run greater risk of overextension and possible dangerous embroilment than in the Middle East. The Soviets are uneasy at the prospect that events there could bring it toward a serious collision with the US. They are no doubt made uncomfortable by the realization that the prolongation of the Arab-Israeli conflict in its present form could lead them into deeper and deeper military involvement and by their inability to arrange an agreement which would not jeopardize their position with their Arab friends.

25. Obviously there are many clouds on the horizon elsewhere as well. As Soviet leaders often express it in public

speeches, "the international situation is complicated." Moscow has no basis for hope of a real accommodation with China. The contest promises to be protracted. It already requires a substantial Soviet military effort and could easily become more dangerous as China's nuclear capacity grows. Moscow is, moreover, nagged by fear of an eventual rapprochement between the US and China. In Eastern Europe it has become apparent once again that Soviet domination rests ultimately on military power. The construction of a "socialist commonwealth" resting on the willing acceptance of Soviet political and economic forms is no nearer realization. The economic troubles which helped to provoke the Czechoslovak rebellion persist and a disaffected population cannot be expected to contribute much to recovery. Hungary's program of economic reform, modest as it is, causes disquiet in Moscow, or at least uncertainty. Romania, though careful to avoid bear-baiting, is as determined as ever to set its own course in many areas of policy. Moscow hopes by careful management of its own and its allies' response to West German Ostpolitik to ease some of these problems but senses that by granting West Germany fuller access to Eastern Europe it may, in the end, only magnify them.

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26. As has been said, the widening gap between the Soviet and US economies, in terms of both size and sophistication, causes concern in Moscow. It may foresee some retrenchment in US international commitments but it does not regard the US as a paper tiger. It is less than fully convinced that it can obtain an acceptable agreement in arms control through SALT and, indeed, fearful that it will be outmaneuvered by the US.

What Kind of Change and How Much?

27. Does the balance sheet on the Soviet international position affect the play of politics within the Politburo? This position has suffered no serious deterioration and in some respects has been improved, though some members of the leadership may realize that in certain key areas progress has been marginal, ephemeral, or even illusory. And the problems the leaders presently face are such that, even when they agree about broad objectives, there is probably room for disagreement over tactics. Given the condition of the Soviet economy, the question of priorities is bound to affect foreign policy decisions and it is reasonable to suppose that there is some tension within the leadership between the urge to enlarge the USSR's international power and prestige and an

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appreciation of the limits of Soviet means. And, finally, simple temperamental differences between the conservative instincts of one leader and the more activist inclinations of another must also exist.

28. Nevertheless, however much the problems of international politics may trouble relations among the Soviet leaders, they are not likely to rise or fall according to their positions on these issues. We are indeed likely to see some changes in the leadership of the USSR soon, but they are most likely to appear -- on the surface at least -- to arise from other factors. The most obvious are age and infirmity. Problems in the economy, which are serious enough in themselves and make some of the USSR's international problems seem even more complicated, could provide the stimulus for further change. There is little, however, in the pattern of politics and policies to point to convulsive change in the leadership or radical departures in policy. Various possible combinations of political and policy changes might go something like this:

A. All but certain: A limited renewal of the Politburo. This would involve, as a minimum the

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retirement of its oldest member, viz. Pelshe (71). The retirement of better known and more important figures, e.g., Kosygin (66) or Suslov (67) -- also on the grounds of age or health -- is likewise possible. Limited to one or two men who were politically important, such changes would not necessarily demonstrate that there had been conflict or imply major modifications of policy. The outlook would be for some modest tinkering with the economy and continuity of policy in other respects.

B. Quite conceivable: A more extensive shakeup, involving several important figures, e.g., adding Shelepin (51) to the others mentioned above (Shelepin's removal on grounds of age or health would not be credible). This would probably be seen as the consequence of political conflict. Assuming Brezhnev (63) was not among those removed, this would signify a strengthening of his position and a weakening of collegiality. It might even mean -- especially if his hand were evident in the choice of the man replacing those removed -- that he was moving to establish clear-cut dominance of the Politburo. This would

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not, however, need to imply a sharp shift in policy, but might be expected to reinforce the present conservative tendency in both domestic and foreign policy. There would be some chance that the Soviets would show less flexibility in SALT.

C. At the outer fringe of the possible: The displacement of most or all of the leading members of the Politburo (Brezhnev, Kosygin, Suslov, Podgorny). If the result were to bring the younger members of the Politburo -- Shelepin, Polyansky (52), Mazurov (56) into the center of power, the outlook would be for greater dynamism in Soviet policy, especially on the economic front. These men might prove to be less hidebound in their attitude toward the US, though certainly there is no guarantee that they would be any friendlier.

D. Improbable: A palace coup putting an end to collective leadership and setting up a new supreme leader. Shelepin comes most readily to mind as organizer of such a move. Though this appears as the least likely change, it would also be the least visible in advance. What such a move would entail for policy is unpredictable. Much would depend upon who was behind it and on other variables such as whether it relied heavily on military support.



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