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SPECIAL ANALYSIS

USSR-POLAND: Moscow's Deepening Concern

Party leader Kania's failure to gain the upper hand, Solidarity's growing assertiveness, Warsaw's release yesterday of two activists, and the broader momentum for radical political change are testing Moscow's patience. We believe that Moscow's continued inability to influence developments is pushing it toward a decision to use coercive measures--to be applied either by the Polish regime or by the Soviets themselves.

Moscow cannot be pleased by events since the 10 November Supreme Court decision. Strikes have continued, and some of the new unions have extracted political concessions.

The Soviets probably are also concerned with some of Kania's experiments at democratization, including the selection of a Catholic deputy premier. Central Committee department chief Leonid Zamyatin--a frequent spokesman for Soviet President Brezhnev--recently criticized the Polish regime for permitting "antisocialist" elements to establish the "structural and legal basis" for challenging the established order. Moscow subsequently warned implicitly that a general transport strike could affect Soviet security interests.

The Soviets have indicated that they would accept a limited role for the new unions as the price of social and political peace in Poland. Soviet public and private comments, however, suggest that the new unions must not exceed certain bounds, including acceptance of the leading role of the party, continued support for public ownership, and adherence to Poland's international alignments, including defense cooperation with Moscow. Recent Soviet criticism of the Polish situation has been touched off by Solidarity's infringement of these principles.

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Soviet Options

One course open to the Soviets is to continue to try to isolate the Polish crisis from domestic Soviet and East European audiences and give Kania additional time to assert party authority. Moscow might hope that a winter of discontent, aggravated by consumer shortages, will sober the population and decrease its demands for political and social change. This patient and moderate course, however, has not improved the situation over the last two months.

A second option for the Soviets is to begin looking for a new leader in Poland. Politburo member Stefan Olszewski is one candidate; the Soviets reportedly found him acceptable as one possible successor to Gierk.

Moscow also could actively raise the specter of intervention. So far the muted public level of Soviet concern has had little impact on Polish militants, who seem to view it as a sign of Soviet unwillingness to intervene.

Moscow probably realizes that none of the above approaches would guarantee an end to the crisis. The Soviet leadership must be giving serious thought to military intervention and the impact this would have, both domestically and abroad.

Concern for Western Reaction

In conversations with Americans and other Westerners, the Soviets take a quite different line, portraying Moscow as intent on letting the Poles resolve the problem. However disingenuous, this line does reflect Moscow's

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realization that military intervention would impinge on its efforts to establish a dialogue with the incoming US administration, compromise its goals at the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe meeting, and ensure Western cohesion on theater nuclear forces and defense expenditures.

Although such considerations will give Moscow pause, we believe they would not be sufficient to forestall military action if Moscow sees the Polish authorities losing control or conceding more to the unions than the Soviets can tolerate.

Outlook

Although the situation is deteriorating and Kania may be slipping into Soviet disfavor, Moscow probably has not yet written off other elements and personalities in the party. Moscow, moreover, probably still hopes that moderating elements in the Church and even within Solidarity itself will push the union militants into an accommodation. We expect Moscow to try to promote such an accommodation by increasingly sharp warnings that its vital interests are at stake in Poland.

The latest events in Poland nevertheless must be making the Kremlin increasingly pessimistic that it can decisively influence the situation short of military means.

Moscow's contingency military preparations are continuing. Since early November, the Soviets have raised the preparedness level of some of the divisions presumed to be part of any force to invade Poland

Because of the extensive measures to improve preparedness that the Soviets have already taken, however, they could carry out the final preparations to invade Poland in less than a week.