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The Evolution of Soviet Collective Leadership

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THE EVOLUTION OF SOVIET COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

The Soviet leadership has now survived more than three and a half years without major changes in its composition or in the way it functions. One reason for this is simply the personalities that make up the politburo: no single leader has the combination of desire and political strength necessary to dominate the political scene as did Khrushchev. Moreover, none has seemed to favor policies that carry the chance of big gains or big losses, and the system of shared power has reinforced this individual conservatism.

Thus, the collective system, as clumsy and inadequate as it is, has shown itself to be practicable in the present circumstances. The men who work within it can and do make policy decisions, and the system has had enough "give" to enable the political fortunes of some top figures to advance while others receded. The system has not, however, been put to the test of a major foreign or domestic failure, nor has it had to deal with the problem of the death of one of the top leaders. Until collectivity shows that it can survive a "crisis" of this magnitude, it must be considered temporary. In the meantime, it will probably continue as the system best suited to the men and to the power relationships at the top of the hierarchy.

The Men in the Kremlin

Within the politburo there have been adjustments in assignments and shifts in power relations since Khrushchev's removal, but the membership of this top policy-making body--especially its full or "voting" members--has changed very little in the past two years. Several appointments were made in the early months of the new regime. "Old Bolshevik" Mikoyan, Khrushchev's closest mentor, retired in December 1965, and in April 1966 Arvid Pelshe replaced Nikolay Shvernik, who was 78 years old and all but inactive. This stability is largely a result of a political standoff. The younger members with ambition and promise have been pushed into the background or maneuvered into positions of little power while the older men at the top lack the ambition or the power to attempt to take over all reins of control.

General Secretary Brezhnev's confidence and authority have

grown over the past three years and he has been able to remove rivals from the party secretariat, the powerful executive arm of the party. His supporters--mainly past and present members of the Ukrainian party organization, such as party secretary Kirilenko--form an impressive plurality within the politburo. In addition, Brezhnev has put a number of his associates in key party and government posts at lower levels. Nevertheless, he appears willing to work within the system of shared power and it is doubtful, even if he so desired, that he has the stuff to become another Khrushchev or Stalin.

Kosygin has proved a competent premier and is widely respected in both government and party circles, but he does not seem to have either the background in party work or the desire to step into the top political position. Ideologist Suslov, a 20-year veteran of the party secretariat, wields considerable influence within the present leadership, particularly on matters of Communist faith and morals. He is reported to have remained largely aloof from party organizational matters, however, and is perhaps too doctrinaire in outlook to command wide support. Podgorny may harbor ambitions, but he is hampered by his assignment to the largely ceremonial post of president and by his declining health. In fact, all four senior members appear to have medical problems of varying degree.

Among the younger members of the politburo, the one man who seemed to have the necessary combination of opportunity, ambition, and leadership qualifications--ex-KGB chief Shelepin--apparently did make a bid to topple the old guard in 1965. Polyansky and Mazurov, the two other aspiring younger members of the politburo, hold positions as first deputy premiers and are thus less well placed to challenge Brezhnev. They may, however, be competing for Kosygin's job. Polyansky is ambitious, a hard liner on many policy issues, and a seemingly close ally of Brezhnev. Mazurov appears to be cast more in the Kosygin mold.

Modus Operandi

The group that ousted Khrushchev in October 1964 reinstated the system of collective leadership in which members of the politburo share--although not equally--in formulating policy. Lenin devised the system; Stalin ignored it. Khrushchev paid lip service to it but increasingly violated it toward the end of his tenure. In fact, his tendency to bypass his politburo colleagues on controversial issues was a major factor in uniting them against him. According to a Soviet political handbook published last summer, the central committee plenum in October 1964 decided that the posts of party first secretary and of premier would not again be held by one man as they were under Khrushchev. An agreement to foreswear the Khrushchev style of leadership was probably necessary

to bring the main plotters together and to rally enough politburo support to oust Khrushchev.

As a constitutional guarantee, this is a slender reed and one that can obviously be abrogated by some future strong man, but the agreement is a step toward the creation of an institutional sanction to regulate political interplay within the leadership. Khrushchev's successors have had to improvise as they went along in order to work out procedures and a code of conduct to protect collectivity, which most, if not all, have a vital personal stake in maintaining. With the passage of time, the various ad hoc arrangements and informal understandings probably have become more binding and less subject to individual manipulation.

The present leadership has been much more scrupulous than Khrushchev in observing the "norms of party life." The division of responsibilities between individuals and between branches of the party and government are more clearly defined. The distinction between the party's guiding, checking role and the government's administrative functions has also been made more clear. Central committee plenums are held more or less within the time limits set by the party statutes, and the top governing bodies meet fairly regularly--the politburo once a week.

There is only fragmentary information on the inner workings of this body, but its approval is required on all important matters as well as on a large number of seemingly trivial questions. Recommendations and position papers are submitted to the politburo after an elaborate process of coordination by interested ministries and party departments. An effort is apparently made to reach unanimous agreement among all 11 members of the politburo. If this is not possible, the minority view may be overridden.

Brezhnev chairs politburo meetings and presumably his opinion carries greater weight than any of the others. Judging by the men who have been given key jobs recently, he clearly has an important voice on matters affecting party organization and assignment of party personnel. Despite the efforts to coordinate even small details of official policy positions and the fairly careful observation of accepted codes of procedure, however, it is clear that differences of views, political rivalries, and the considerable overlapping of responsibilities among members of the politburo all create strain within the leadership. Friction between Brezhnev and Kosygin, for instance, is reported to have arisen over a number of issues.

The composition of the politburo now more closely reflects and is responsible to the power relationships among the major interest groups in the country. The party apparatus, government bureaucracy, agricultural interests, and the military - defense industry complex all seem to have men on the politburo to whom they can look to represent their views.

This has favored both stability and orthodoxy. In contrast to Khrushchev, who was constantly waging war against one bureaucratic element or another in his effort to get things moving his way, the present leaders appear less willing to offend any of the big interest groups.

Collective leadership by its very nature has meant hesitation, procrastination, and compromise. These charactistics appear to be more marked now than during the first year of the present leaders' rule.

Domestic Programs--Yesterday and Today

When the current leadership took over from Khrushchev, it let loose a flurry of legislative activity. Some of this merely involved undoing what Khrushchev had done, but several new programs were put forward and a few of these seemed well designed to put the affairs of the country and the party back in order after Khrushchev's tinkering. "Businesslike" would be a fitting label.

An ambitious agricultural program was launched in March 1965. It aimed at combining massive investments with reform in the pricing and the procurement systems. This program, unlike Khrushchev's earlier, hoped-for panaceas, promised a serious, long-range attack on Soviet agricultural ills.

In October, the long-discussed economic reform for the industrial sector was approved. It gave plant managers greater authority at the expense of central planners and made profit an important indicator of economic performance. This reform represented an assortment of painful compromises and did not really attack the roots of the problem, but it is slowly being put into operation and has had a limited, though beneficial, effect on the economy. The most difficult phase of economic reform, however, still lies ahead.

It was also during 1965 that the regime renewed Khrushchev's pledge to draft a new constitution and revived the idea of calling a collective farm (kolkhoz) congress to amend the kolkhoz charter. This charter had been drawn up in 1935 as a model to be followed by all collective farmers. There was considerable debate in the press about what the new charter should be like, and about the advantages and disadvantages of a proposal--advanced by Brezhnev in early 1966--to establish a hierarchy of elective unions to manage the collective farms. The kolkhoz union idea has long been favored by the Ukrainian farm lobby and its spokesmen in the politburo; it has been strongly opposed by the Ministry of Agriculture and by the Belorussian party organization, which tend to favor unified state control over both collective and state farms.

These politically charged debates on the constitution and on the organization and management

of kolkhozes have extended to related questions basic to the future course of the Soviet system. Although not promoted by the leadership, collectively or individually, this discussion was at least tolerated. In any event, there were new ideas in the air and the belief prevailed that the new regime would not only carry on the liberalizing trends that were evident under Khrushchev but might even do a better job of it. The collective farm charter was to have been drafted by late 1966. The constitution, according to Brezhnev, would be ready in time "to crown" the 50th anniversary celebration in November 1967.

By late 1965 and early 1966, however, this sense of movement and searching in Moscow began to give way to an atmosphere of increasing orthodoxy and concern with domestic discipline. The retirement in December 1965 of President Mikoyan, the man who came closest to being a spokesman for the intellectual community, was a kind of watershed.

The Growing Orthodoxy in Soviet Policy

The international situation certainly contributed to the growing orthodoxy in Soviet policy. The Soviets decided to respond to the United States' stepped-up military involvement in Vietnam with their own firm commitment to Hanoi (something Khrushchev had avoided). Fear of a Chinese Communist military threat and the Middle East crisis last summer have given the spokesmen for the military and the defense industry more powerful voices in policy-making circles, particularly when it comes to a question of allocating resources. The heightening international tension also proved a boon for other conservatives who oppose steps toward detente with the West and favor greater discipline at home.

With the atmosphere not conducive to the cause of reform-minded moderates, their position in the leadership has been weakened. Kosygin has come to have less influence than Brezhnev, who has shown himself ready to listen to the military. Brezhnev has been careful to stay close to the center of opinion in the politburo, and that center is considerably more to the conservative side than it was at the time of Khrushchev's ouster.

Another reason for the leadership's recent stand-pat approach was its concern with presenting a facade of national unity during the 1967 jubilee year. Meaningful debate on almost all issues virtually disappeared from the Soviet press and official attacks mounted against proponents of further decentralization of economic management. Although the farm debate seems to have resumed since the celebrations, the basic issues still appear to be unresolved and no new date for a collective farm congress has yet been set. The commission to draft a new constitution apparently did not survive the jubilee year and may have been disbanded. The leadership in its

present conservative frame of mind is obviously content to live with the old "Stalin constitution" of 1936.

Even during the jubilee year, perenially thorny issue of resource allocations. Some aspects of the budgets and plans announced in October were left hazy, but the basic decision was made to sacrifice long-range investment goals in agriculture--and to some extent in industry as well--in order to meet increased military and consumer appetites. Although this brought an immediate public outcry from Polyansky, the politburo member with primary responsibility for agricultural policy, he may not be able to do anything more than complain for the time being, given the good harvests of the past two years and the strength of the forces lined up against him.

The Yegorychev Incident

The jubilee year was also marred by the Middle East crisis, which apparently occasioned an attack by Moscow party boss Yegorychev on the leadership's handling of the crisis. Although there have been a number of reports about what he said, none can be fully verified. It is probable that Yegorychev argued that the country's defenses were flabby and in no shape to respond effectively in the crisis.

The four senior members of the politburo--Brezhnev, Kosygin, Podgorny, and Suslov--worked closely together during and immediately after the crisis, and appeared to be in agreement on the course to be taken; but Brezhnev, at least, may have been shaken by Yegorychev's criticism and the support that it garnered. Yegorychev was summarily removed from his Moscow post, and steps were apparently taken to correct the situation that he is reported to have complained of in the armed forces. A desire of the top four to avoid further criticism on this issue may have played a part in their willingness later on to listen more closely to the military at budget time.

An additional complicating factor in the Yegorychev case was his probable association with politburo member Shelepin and his "Komsomol group." This connection raises the possibility that Yegorychev's fall was part of a gradual campaign on Brezhnev's part to break up Shelepin's group and to neutralize him politically. [redacted] the senior leaders--and Brezhnev in particular--were concerned about Shelepin's factional political activity: he wanted Brezhnev's job. Nevertheless the views of the Shelepin group--or what are thought to be their views: espousal of a more militant foreign policy and stress on discipline, efficiency, and centralized administration at home--retain wide support in important party and government circles.

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This platform's appeal would explain why the majority of the

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politburo, at every step in the process of weeding out the Komsomol clique, at the same time seemed to move to adopt the views and methods of those being ousted--witness the Yegorychev case. The pattern can be seen as far back as December 1965, when Shelepin lost his party-state control post while at the same time Mikoyan, the liberals' best advocate, retired and the moderate-minded Podgorny was kicked upstairs to the presidency. Little by little, Brezhnev has gravitated toward the conservative side. It is obvious that he has not felt the same pressures from the moderate wing.

Looking Ahead

The present collective system will probably continue to result in policy decisions that are orthodox and unimaginative. The prospects for the system itself hinge to a large extent on matters of chance. The strongest argument for its continuing is simply the fact that it has survived for three and a half years without significant change. On the other hand, it is still an "unnatural" way of managing political power in the Soviet Union and it has not had to face either a major policy failure or the removal of one of the top leaders. A test on one or both of these scores, however, may not be far off.

There were a flurry of rumors during the winter that Kosygin would soon leave the political scene. Most of the reports say that he will retire, citing poor health and dissatisfaction with the trend of thinking on the politburo as the reasons. As for the latter factor, it would appear that as long as the economy continues to move ahead, Kosygin will stay on the job. He probably plays the most important role at present in maintaining the delicate power balance at the top. Should he step down, his moderating influence would be lost and the political balance might be tipped in Brezhnev's favor, although even this would not necessarily spell the end of collective leadership.

The growing ferment in Eastern Europe, particularly in Czechoslovakia, is also likely to test the cohesion of the Soviet leadership. Thus far, these events seem to have reinforced the retrograde tendency in Moscow. The regime's first response has been to tighten domestic controls in an apparent effort to ensure that the ferment does not spread to the Soviet Union. As events continue to unfold, however, apprehension is likely to grow in the Kremlin. If things go badly for Moscow and the leadership reacts indecisively, there would be another powerful argument that could be used against one or several of the current leaders.

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