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# **Soviet Elite Concerns About Popular Discontent and Official Corruption**

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**An Intelligence Assessment**

State Dept. review  
completed

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December 1982*

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# **Soviet Elite Concerns About Popular Discontent and Official Corruption**

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**An Intelligence Assessment**

This assessment was prepared by [redacted]  
Current Support Division, Office of Soviet Analysis.  
Comments and queries are welcome and may be  
addressed to the Chief, Current Support Division,  
SOVA, [redacted]

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**Soviet Elite Concerns  
About Popular Discontent  
and Official Corruption** [Redacted]

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**Summary**

*Information available  
as of 1 December 1982  
was used in this report.*

Brezhnev's death comes at a time of heightened concern among Soviet elites about public morale and official abuse of power. The dominant attitude appears to be one of pessimism about the popular mood and apprehension about the implications of corruption for the future of the Soviet system. There is also considerable sentiment among some elites for firm measures to restore discipline and morality within the population at large and within the regime itself.

This sentiment, which probably accounts in part for Andropov's ascendancy, may lead the Politburo to move toward more conservative social and political policies. Such policies would be compatible with some changes in economic administration, but probably would preclude any broad introduction of market mechanisms, increase in popular participation in the political process at lower levels, thaw in cultural policy, or expansion of unofficial contacts with the West.

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**Soviet Elite Concerns  
About Popular Discontent  
and Official Corruption** [Redacted]

Over the past several years, and especially over the past several months, a number of Western observers in Moscow have detected in Soviet society an air of general depression and foreboding about the future. Some of these observers believe that the mood of the population changed during the latter part of Brezhnev's tenure. [Redacted]

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[Redacted]  
[Redacted] was struck by a significant growth of pessimism among middle class citizens and perceived a diminishing base of support for the regime [Redacted]

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[Redacted] portrayed the Soviet Union today as a country beset by a major crisis of values. [Redacted]

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[Redacted]

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[Redacted] found the sense of gloom in Moscow during a six-month stay this year much deeper and more widespread than previously. Dusko Doder, *The Washington Post* Moscow reporter, in a series of articles published in November maintained that the Soviet Union has entered a period characterized by stark pessimism about the future at all levels of society. A political officer in the US Embassy in Moscow has recently reported his similar impression of the climate of opinion in the Soviet Union. [Redacted]

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This paper assesses recent evidence on how Soviet elites themselves perceive the mood of the population and the problem of corruption in the political system. Most of the reports cited apparently refer to perceptions of middle-level officials, although some of the reports may refer more to attitudes current among the "intelligentsia" (white-collar professionals) than to attitudes of officials. Where possible, the paper identifies attitudes with particular elite groups [Redacted]

The imprecision of much of the reporting does not permit a more systematic delineation of differences among various elites. Gaps in the data base and the probable biases of individual sources necessarily make

some of the judgments in the paper tentative. Nevertheless, available evidence supports the general conclusion that Soviet elites have become more concerned about the potential consequences of popular discontent and official abuse of power than they have been for the past quarter of a century. [Redacted]

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**Uneasiness About Social Malaise**

Soviet elites are aware that in recent years conditions giving rise to popular discontent have worsened while the regime's resources for maintaining social stability and motivating the work force have diminished. Officials are probably most concerned about the adverse effect of popular dissatisfaction on labor productivity. But they are also worried about the possibility of social disturbances serious enough to produce challenges to political control. [Redacted]

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Since Stalin's death, coercion has diminished as an instrument of political control. Ideology is virtually dead as a means of inspiring loyalty to the regime and high worker productivity. The regime's control of information has also loosened somewhat. Soviet citizens have greater access than ever before to information from abroad and from unofficial sources within the USSR. Expanded contacts with the West have enabled the population to compare its lot with that of peoples who enjoy a much higher standard of living. [Redacted]

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More importantly, since the mid-1970s declining economic growth rates have made it difficult for the regime to provide the gradual improvements in living standards that the Soviet population had come to expect in the Khrushchev and early Brezhnev years. Brezhnev abandoned Khrushchev's ideological reformism and attempt to rationalize party rule on the basis of a broad "populist" consensus of values. Instead, he sought a narrower legitimacy for the regime, based more completely on attention to the population's material needs. In the end, however, he

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failed to satisfy consumer desires. Shrinking opportunities for upward social mobility and the hardening of class lines appeared to contribute to a loss of faith among many in their ability to improve their material circumstances through individual effort. [redacted]

commitment of Soviet young people, their "consumerism," their interest in religion, and their desire to avoid military service. He also acknowledged that Soviet managers now face a difficult time in dealing with workers because workers are offended by the privileges managers enjoy.

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These developments have led to a general growth of apathy, cynicism, and disgruntlement in Soviet society. This pervasive malaise manifests itself in a growing consumption of alcohol, increasing labor turnover, episodic strike activity, and a flourishing black market. Over the past several years, official Soviet statements have recognized the negative effects of these phenomena on worker output. Official publications, for example, have stressed that labor turnover produced by worker dissatisfaction with living conditions is economically counterproductive. High-level regime spokesmen, including former Premier Kosygin and General Secretary Brezhnev, have acknowledged that wage incentives lose force when workers are dissatisfied with the quality of goods and services available for purchase. [redacted]

- In February a USA-Canada Institute official told an American official that there was a great deal of unrest in non-Russian republics. The Soviet population, he stated, is disgusted, unhappy, indifferent, and inert.<sup>1</sup>
- Another official of the institute told an American official in April that Soviet society faced a major crisis in discipline, reflected in labor problems, crime, and friction between nationalities.

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The more immediate problems in food supply caused by four consecutive harvest shortfalls have increased official wariness of the popular mood. [redacted]

[redacted]

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[redacted]

<sup>1</sup> On the surface, elite concern about popular inertia and apathy may appear logically inconsistent with elite concern about the potential for disorder. Apathy, it may be argued, produces economic problems for the regime by lowering labor productivity but does not create political problems in the sense of producing unrest. [redacted]

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Soviet officials in discussions with foreigners over the past year have expressed concern about a broad range of problems relating to civic morale:

This apparent ambiguity in elite attitudes, however, has major antecedents in Russian history. Russian elites, both in Tsarist times and in the Soviet era, have feared that the population's inertia and alienation from the state could be transformed into spontaneous eruptions of unrest. Several Western studies of Soviet society during the late Stalin period also contended that the typical character structure of the Russian worker and peasant classes was one that fluctuated sharply between passivity and violent revolt against authority. [redacted]

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- Last December a Soviet source told US Embassy officers that a department head in the Central Committee's Academy of Social Sciences had expressed the opinion that the country was in a state of "economic, political, and ideological crisis."
- The same month, *Pravda's* Propaganda Department chief, in a discussion with US Embassy officers, expressed considerable concern over the lack of

The pattern of Russian social history suggests that these perceptions of Soviet elites and Western scholars have not been entirely erroneous. Over the centuries, lengthy periods of resigned quiescence on the part of the masses have been punctuated periodically by jacqueries. Thus, the concern of Soviet elites today about the dual problem of popular indifference and popular protest, while sharpened by current conditions, has deep historical roots. [redacted]

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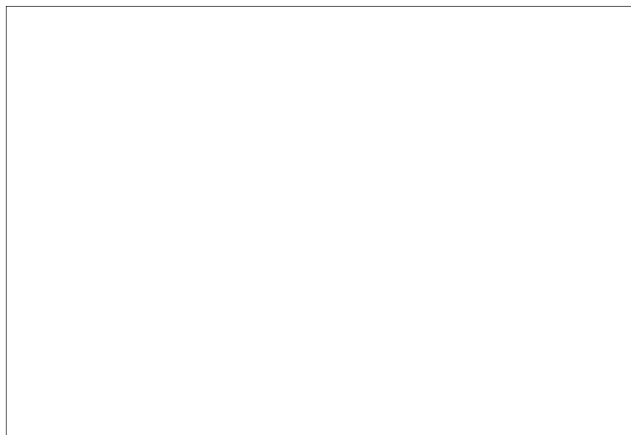
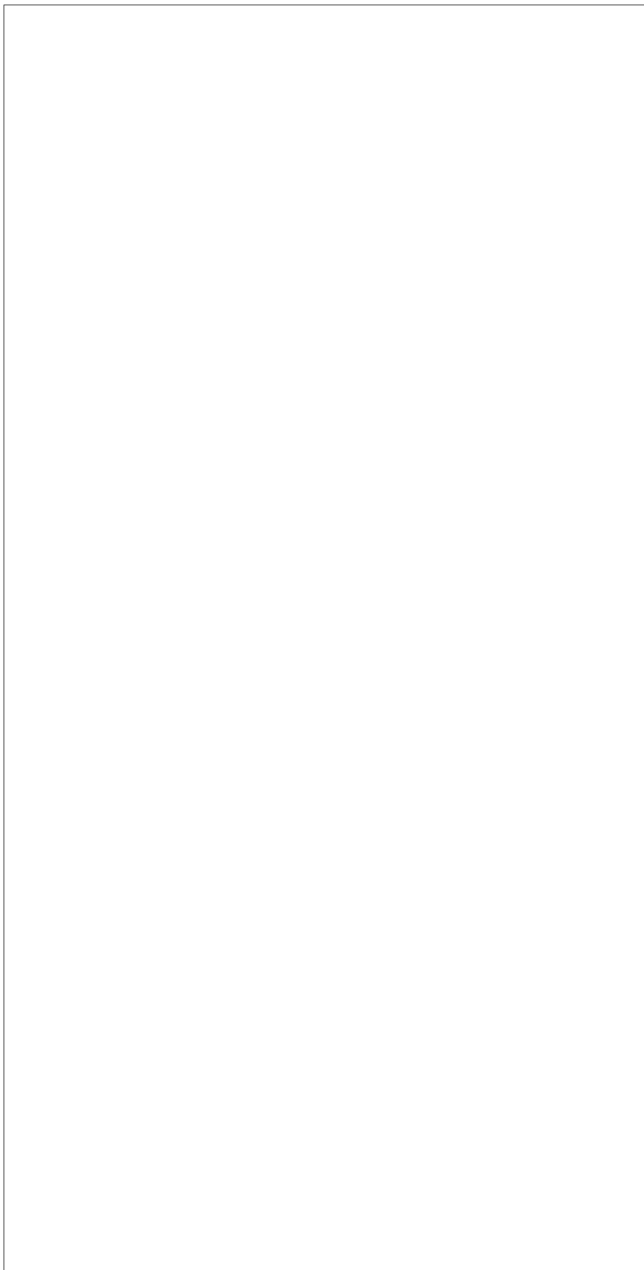
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Events in Poland over the last two years probably have heightened these concerns. The Polish strike movement did not produce any significant sympathy protests in the Soviet Union, but it focused the attention of Soviet officials on internal Soviet conditions that could create problems for them:



Over the past year Soviet propagandists have increased their efforts to combat "antisocial" behavior and moral laxity. Particular attention has been paid to Soviet youth's cynicism, "hooliganism," infatuation with Western consumer goods, and lack of appreciation for improvements in the standard of living since World War II. At the same time, regime actions such as closing down direct-dial telephone service to and from Western countries have served to curb contacts between Soviet dissidents and foreigners. [redacted]

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Recent speeches and articles by military figures have also displayed unusual concern about pacifism among young people and about ethnic tensions in the armed forces. Defense Minister Ustinov's Armed Forces Day speech in February placed unusual stress on the theme of harmony among the various nationalities serving in the armed forces. In a pamphlet published in June, Chief of Staff Ogarkov deplored youth's tendency to underestimate the danger of war. General Yepishev, head of the military's Main Political Directorate, made similar remarks about youth's pacifism in a July lecture. [redacted]

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**Corruption and the Campaign Against It**

Reinforcing apprehension about the popular mood is an apparently growing concern among Soviet elites about rampant corruption throughout the system. [redacted]



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we believe many officials fear that corruption is eroding the regime's legitimacy, undermining public respect for law and order, and diminishing the party's capacity to get the country moving again. [redacted]

greater access party officials have to choice consumer goods. [redacted]

Corruption, of course, is present in varying degrees in most societies and has been a prominent feature of Soviet life since the 1920s. Nevertheless, although it is impossible to measure the extent of corruption precisely, there are indications that during the past several years bribery, embezzlement, and other abuses of power among Soviet elites have become so prevalent and so blatant as to suggest a significant lowering of accepted norms of behavior.<sup>2</sup> [redacted]

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Most members of the political elite seem to have developed a caste mentality and appear strongly motivated by a desire to preserve and extend their privileges, especially for their children. [redacted]

Corruption and the competition for privilege commonly are regarded as symptoms of the loss of social purpose among elite groups, but they are also a cause of elite dissatisfaction. [redacted]

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Nepotism and illegal activity to advance private ends are reportedly common at the highest levels. The efforts of Leningrad party boss Romanov, a Politburo member, to feather his nest are notorious. Brezhnev himself, by assiduously promoting the career interests of both his son-in-law and his son despite the reported involvement of his children in corrupt activities, was a prime offender. [redacted]

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Current economic stringencies may have sharpened competition among Soviet elites for perquisites and heightened resentment among nonparty elites of the

<sup>2</sup> An evaluation of the extent of corruption depends on how the term is defined. If defined in an absolute sense as the use of position or power to further private ends, virtually the entire Soviet elite is corrupt. If defined in a relative sense as the use of position or power to further private ends in ways that violate accepted norms of behavior, corruption in the Soviet Union is much more restricted. If the latter definition is employed, the threshold of what constitutes corruption rises as the subordination of the public weal to private interest becomes a widely tolerated feature of a political system. For an extended discussion of this subject, see Konstantine M. Simis, *USSR: The Corrupt Society* (New York, 1982). Simis was a Moscow lawyer who emigrated from the Soviet Union in 1977. [redacted]

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[redacted] reportedly implicating Brezhnev's children contributed to the erosion of Brezhnev's political position in the months prior to his death. According to dissident Marxist Roy Medvedev, Andropov may also have used a rumored scandal involving Kirilenko's son to force Kirilenko's removal from the leadership. [redacted]

The official campaign against corruption, which began last year, should be viewed in the context of these concerns on the part of KGB and other elites. The campaign may serve several purposes. On one level, it is in our view intended to combat "antisocial" behavior on the part of ordinary citizens and to persuade the population at large of the regime's determination to root out malfeasance within the party. The campaign may also be intended to provide excuses and scapegoats for shortages of consumer goods and other economic dislocations. By exposing corruption on the part of lower level functionaries and prosecuting some of them, higher officials may hope to deflect criticism from themselves. [redacted]

Because so many higher officials are themselves vulnerable to charges of corruption, however, a campaign against corruption at lower levels runs the risk of getting out of control. Although probably intended initially as propaganda for the populace and secondarily as a protective device for top leaders, the anticorruption campaign has become a vehicle of political struggle within the Politburo. The fact that a number of fairly high-level officials have actually been netted during the course of this campaign (an article in *Pravda* indicated that one USSR deputy minister was executed) suggests that some leaders have exploited anticorruption sentiment to attack political opponents. [redacted]

Andropov, in particular, evidently has used the anticorruption issue to further his political ambitions. As a former KGB chief he possesses derogatory information about his fellow Politburo members. Andropov is consequently in a position either directly to blackmail leaders who fear exposure of their illegitimate activities, or to use the derogatory information more subtly—by selectively leaking it in order to damage an opponent's reputation, or by prosecuting corruption cases at lower levels aggressively so as to create a political climate that other leaders find threatening. Andropov evidently has employed this political weapon already. A KGB investigation of corruption cases

The anticorruption issue may have facilitated Andropov's rise in a more important way. [redacted]

[redacted] Andropov has a personal reputation of being "clean." This reputation possibly made his candidacy a popular one among broader segments of the political elite. According to a senior Soviet diplomat in Yugoslavia, Andropov received an unusual standing ovation at the May meeting of the Central Committee that promoted him to the secretariat. [redacted]

Whether or not top leaders share the preferences of lower level officials, they are sensitive to them, and support for Andropov within the elite as a whole may have been a factor in the Politburo's selection of him as the successor. [redacted]

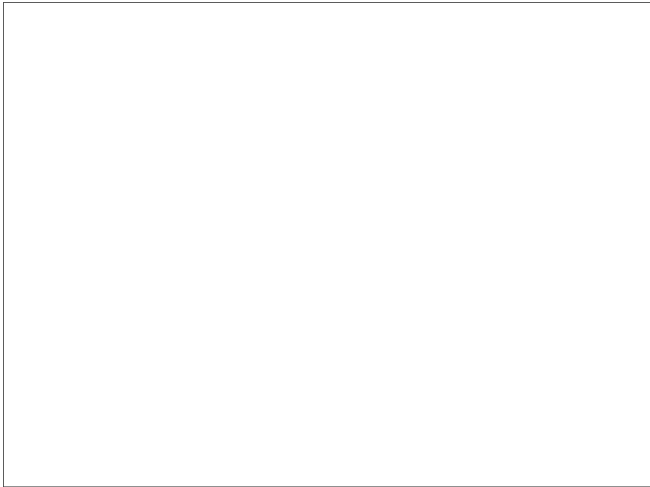
Many officials protected by Brezhnev's personnel policies, which treated corrupt and incompetent party workers indulgently, may fear a concerted drive to purify the party. Several Western newsmen in Moscow have picked up rumors that Chernenko attempted to capitalize on this fear. Chernenko's favorable and pointed reference to Brezhnev's personnel policies in his speech to the Central Committee meeting that installed Andropov could be interpreted as evidence in support of these rumors. One reason for Chernenko's failure may have been that the concern of the elite as a whole about the long-term corrosive effects of corruption carried greater political weight than the apprehension of the most culpable party officials about the consequences of a purge: [redacted]

#### Yearning for a Strong Leader

Perceptions of an erosion of discipline within the population and the party have evidently led many officials to long for a return to the order of Stalin's day. Although few in the Soviet Union would welcome a full-scale rehabilitation of the Stalinist terror

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apparatus, many officials see "Stalin" as a positive symbol for the sort of tough leadership they believe is needed today:



- In July, a senior Soviet diplomat in Washington told a former high-level US official and Soviet specialist that he was a "Stalinist" in the sense that he believed that for the USSR to survive and to improve it needed a great deal of social discipline and a strong leader of the Stalin type, which Brezhnev was not.

Several Soviet sources have suggested that Andropov is, or is seen to be, a man who can answer the country's need for firm leadership. A USA-Canada Institute official, for example, told a US official last April that of the current leaders, only Andropov fit the model of a *vozhd* (strong leader).



In addition to pragmatism and tactical flexibility in dealing with dissent, Andropov has the reputation of being a strong advocate of measures to prevent Western ideological penetration and any manifestations of civil unrest or disobedience.

In recent months, several press articles have implied that policies during Brezhnev's tenure led to a growth of permissiveness in society. Last November, for

example, an article by well-known conservative publicist Aleksandr Chakovsky darkly averred that:

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Some comrades have evidently misinterpreted the "atmosphere of humanism" which was introduced by the October 1964 plenum [which removed Khrushchev and installed Brezhnev]. . . . These comrades are not in step with the mass of the Soviet people and are not contributing to the building of Communism.

The head of the Moscow Writers' Union, Feliks Kuznetsov, told US Embassy officers in November 1981 that his recent articles were part of an effort to "tighten the screws" and make a "correction" in the climate of relative tolerance that has prevailed in domestic policies since the 20th Party Congress of 1956. Other articles have implicitly criticized the publication in the Soviet press of articles that take a "pacifist" line.

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**Russian Nationalism**

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The recent emphasis on Russian nationalist themes in Soviet media probably reflects a heightened desire to buttress internal discipline. In the past Russian nationalism has been closely associated with repressive social policies. Appeals to Russian nationalism may be intended to lay the groundwork for efforts to assert greater central control over the minority nationalities, which Russian leaders doubtless believe are less disciplined and more susceptible to foreign influences than the Russian population. Attempts to associate the regime more closely with traditional Russian nationalism may also be viewed as a means of countering consumer discontent and offsetting the waning of ideology as a legitimizing force in the Russian republic itself.

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There have been several indications that Russian nationalism is gaining strength as a current of thought in official circles:

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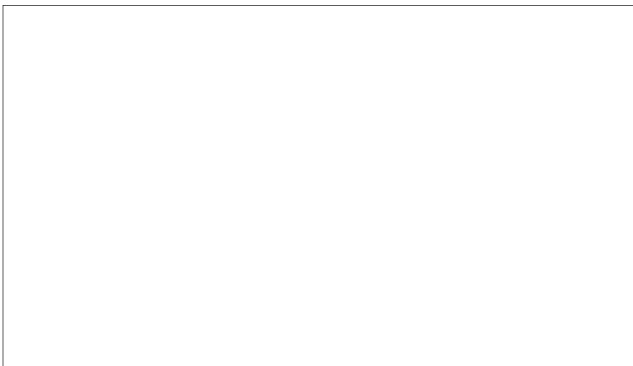
- Over the past two years, a number of articles and speeches of Politburo members—especially those of the now deceased Suslov—have been more supportive of Russian nationalism than leadership pronouncements earlier in Brezhnev's tenure.

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- A Central Committee resolution earlier this year marking the anniversary of the formation of the USSR tilted strongly toward Russian nationalism. The resolution placed heavier emphasis than previous official statements during the Brezhnev years on the promotion of Russian language study as an instrument of integration and on the need to protect the rights of Russians living in non-Russian republics. The resolution also called for greater assistance from non-Russian republics in the development of the RSFSR's Far Eastern and Siberian resources and the non-black-earth zone of European Russia. It attributed a special role to the Russian people in past Soviet achievements, emphasized the centralized character of the Soviet state, and made only passing reference to the theoretical equality of Soviet nationalities.

- Brezhnev, in a March 1982 speech probably coordinated within the Politburo, expanded on these themes to give a vigorous endorsement to investment and cadres policies beneficial to the Russian republic and to Russians living in other Soviet republics. He advocated the migration of workers from Central Asia to areas of the RSFSR suffering labor shortages, criticized the notion that valuable specialists should remain in their own republics when other regions had a greater need for them, and emphasized even more strongly than in the past that projects throughout the RSFSR had priority over those in other regions. He also called for greater representation of ethnic Russians in party and state institutions in non-Russian republics.



- The 26th Party Congress in February 1981 enunciated pronatalist policies to be implemented first in Slavic regions, which have much lower birthrates than most areas of the country. [redacted]

The increased official attention to Russian nationalist themes and the heightened emphasis on discipline have, however, produced a reaction from advocates of more "liberal" domestic policies. Some strong attacks on conservative Russian nationalist writers, for example, have appeared in the press in recent months. Most notable in this regard were articles by Professor Kuleshov in *Pravda* last February and by literary critic Surovtsev in the literary journal *Znamya* in March. [redacted] 25X1

Moreover, speeches of some leaders, especially secretary Chernenko and Georgian party boss Shevardnadze, have paid less attention to the need for vigilance and discipline than to the need for party responsiveness to public opinion. Chernenko's speeches, for example, have tended to attribute the crisis in Poland more to the Gierek regime's loss of contact with the masses than to the Polish party's loss of its ideological bearings. Chernenko has also cultivated a "populist" image by promoting commissions to study public opinion, calling for intraparty "democracy," campaigning for greater attention to letters from citizens, reportedly opposing expressions of extreme Russian chauvinism in literature, and explicitly criticizing Stalin's repression. His advocacy of steps to pacify rather than repress disgruntled elements of society suggests that the proper mix of conciliatory and coercive social policies is a live issue among Soviet elites. [redacted] 25X1

**Conclusions** 25X1

Soviet elite concerns about popular morale may be tempered by cognizance that the regime possesses still powerful instruments of repression and by a belief that even certain "negative" features of contemporary Soviet life—such as religion, the black market, and alcoholism—serve as escape valves for popular frustrations. Soviet elites probably also believe that many citizens—especially of the older generation—retain a high degree of attachment to dominant values of the political culture. [redacted]

[redacted] most Soviet citizens seem proud of the Soviet global role and place a high premium on personal security and public order. [redacted]

[redacted] few Soviet citizens know much about Western democracy or regard it as an

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attractive model, and that some fear capitalism as much as they envy it. Dissent is fragmented, and there is no organized labor movement or national church that could serve as a unifying center for disgruntled elements of the population. [redacted]

Nevertheless, since the mid-1970s the mood of Soviet society seems to have shifted. Although habits of submission to authority remain stronger in the Soviet Union than among most peoples in Eastern Europe, the Soviet population has apparently become more demanding, more skeptical, and less pliable. As cited earlier in the paper, Soviet officials are aware that many non-Russians reject core values of the system and that many young people doubt that the system any longer *has* values or ideals. The welfare-oriented features of the Soviet system have always been those that evoked the most positive responses from the population, but the regime's performance in recent years has increased doubts among consumers about the party's commitment and ability to provide adequately for their material well-being. [redacted]

These trends in Soviet society have given Soviet elites cause to question the efficacy of current policies for ensuring high labor productivity and regime legitimacy. The impact of low public morale on worker output is probably the most immediate concern of officials. But Soviet elites also know—as Brezhnev reminded them on more than one occasion—that the problem of satisfying the material needs of the population is “not only an economic, but also a political matter.” Judging by vigilance and anticorruption campaigns of recent years, [redacted]

[redacted] Soviet elites today probably feel less secure about popular quiescence than at any time since the de-Stalinization period of the 1950s. [redacted]

Reporting about pervasive corruption at all levels of the Soviet system also suggests that Soviet officials today have a lower commitment to serving the party or the country, as opposed to their bureaucratic and especially their private interests, than ever before.

There is apprehension among elites that corruption is sapping the party's moral authority and its ability to provide effective leadership.<sup>3</sup> [redacted]

These trends in elite attitudes may have major implications for policy change in the post-Brezhnev period. Initially, internal policy may contain a mix of “authoritarian” measures (for example, increased central controls over the use and movement of labor) and “liberal” ones (such as increased support for private agriculture and some private services). On balance, however, it seems likely that Andropov and his colleagues will increasingly attempt to accommodate elite concerns by bolstering Russian nationalism as a prop to the system and adopting generally more conservative social policies. The regime may, for example, place greater emphasis on negative incentives (the loss of one's job or reduction in salary, the threat of arrest) than on positive incentives (higher wages, improved supplies of consumer goods) for political conformity and hard work. [redacted]

At the same time, Andropov is likely to undertake a major crackdown on corruption. The appointment of former head of the Azerbaijan party Geydar Aliyev to the post of First Deputy Chairman of the Council of

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that these statements are relative. They do not suggest that corruption is a new phenomenon in Soviet life, or that patriotism no longer serves as one motivating force in Soviet elite behavior. Rather, it is the judgment of this paper that Soviet elites today are less inclined than in the past to subordinate personal advantage to the pursuit of societal goals as defined by the party. With all caution against romanticizing the CPSU in earlier periods, it may be said that Soviet elites under each of Brezhnev's predecessors exhibited a higher degree of idealism than appears to be the case today. Ideological fervor was of course greatest under Lenin in the early years of Soviet power, but during the Stalin years Soviet officials retained a conviction that they were pioneers building a new society. In fact, it was precisely during the darkest years of the purges that large numbers of Soviet party cadres made the supreme sacrifice of confessing to crimes they had not committed. Although some confessions were induced by torture, considerable evidence suggests that loyalty—to Stalin and to the party—was the chief motivation of many of the show trial defendants. Finally, even under Khrushchev, party officials working on ambitious programs such as the Virgin Lands campaign displayed an *esprit* and sense of social purpose that nothing in the Brezhnev years matched. [redacted]

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Ministers may have been a first step in this direction. Aliyev, a career KGB official with no experience in economic management, has been in the forefront of the anticorruption campaign.

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The elevation of former Gosplan official Nikolay Ryzhkov to the secretariat may also portend the introduction of more forceful measures to curb official malfeasance and to ensure strict government compliance with party directives. Ryzhkov, who will be overseeing the work of ministries in key sectors of heavy industry, has stressed in his published writings the need for greater executive and labor discipline. Andropov's speech on 22 November to the Central Committee also emphasized this theme.

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Such a policy orientation would be compatible with some changes in economic administration. These might include an end to state subsidies for items of basic consumption and greater emphasis on monetary incentives for factory managers to utilize labor more efficiently—which would lead to the firing of nonproductive workers. Efforts to strengthen political and social controls over the population probably would preclude, however, any broad introduction of market mechanisms, increase in popular participation in the political process at lower levels, thaw in cultural policy, or expansion of unofficial contacts with the West.

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