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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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The Dobrynin Visit to East Berlin: More than a Parish Call?

Summary

The Soviets probably used Dobrynin's visit to East Berlin on January 19 through 20 to pressure East Germany to follow Moscow's lead in dealing with the post-election West German government. The coolness in East German media coverage of the visit indicates persistent differences between Moscow and East Berlin over intra-German relations and a range of political and economic issues. East German leader Honecker's defiant restatement during the visit of positions known to diverge from Moscow's suggests that continued rough sledding in Soviet-East German relations lies ahead. Honecker's upcoming meetings with Shevardnadze (February) and Gorbachev (June) should shed light on the ability of both sides to manage the frictions. [redacted]

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1. Soviet party secretary and International Department Chief Dobrynin visited East Berlin from 19 through 20 January for talks with his GDR counterpart Hermann Axen and East German leader Honecker. The visit--Dobrynin's first to Eastern Europe since he became party secretary--occurred almost simultaneously with the Soviet announcement of an early February visit to East Germany by Soviet foreign minister Shevardnadze. [redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared in the European Assessments Division of the Office of Soviet Analysis [redacted] and in the East European Division of the Office of European Analysis [redacted]. It elaborates on a response to a request from Fritz Ermarth, Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for European and Soviet Affairs on the National Security Council Staff. Comments and questions are welcome and should be directed to the Chief, European Assessments Division, SOVA [redacted] or the Chief, East European Division, EURA [redacted].

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Soviet Motives and Objectives

2. The Soviet media characterized the Dobrynin visit as a "detailed exchange of views" on international and bilateral issues but gave no further details. Soviet Ambassador to East Berlin Kochemasov told the British ambassador that the meetings dealt with the Geneva negotiations and Afghanistan. [redacted]

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3. Although these subjects may have been discussed peripherally and we lack other direct evidence on the substance of the talks, we do not find Kochemasov's "read out" credible. Based on the timing and context of the visit--less than a week before the West German elections (25 January)--we believe Dobrynin forcefully reminded Honecker to follow Moscow's lead closely in dealings with the new Kohl government. As the election campaign entered its final stretch, the Soviets had avoided contributing to a Kohl victory by blatant interference. Nevertheless, Moscow made it clear--through a calculated cooling of relations with the FRG in November and December 1986--that it was prepared to put a rapprochement on ice to pressure Kohl to be more accommodating to Soviet views on security issues such as SDI. [redacted]

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4. The choice of Dobrynin--who, according to Soviet Ambassador to the FRG Kvitsinsky, is charged with overseeing Soviet-West German exchanges at all levels--underscored Moscow's determination to keep the East Germans in lock step with Soviet policy towards the FRG. Additionally, Dobrynin may have reminded them of high-level Soviet concerns expressed in talks on trade and oil deliveries stretching into December 1986. For the past year, the Soviets have been pressing the East Germans to increase their deliveries of high quality, high technology goods and consumer products to the USSR and to participate in joint ventures. [redacted]

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5. We do not believe that the Soviets used the Dobrynin visit to discuss plans for any new moves to woo Bonn. Had they done so, the GDR's response would have been more favorable than its cool media treatment suggests (see paragraphs 7-8 below). Dobrynin may even have made the journey to warn Honecker that the Soviets, for their own tactical reasons, will prolong a chill in political relations with Bonn to exploit perceived divergences between Kohl and Foreign Minister Genscher over East-West issues as well as between the Kohl government and certain sectors of the West German

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public. In this context, we believe Dobrynin probably told Honecker not to interpret the recently rescheduled April visit to West Germany of Soviet deputy premier Antonov as the start of a new warming trend. [redacted]

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6. From the standpoint of Soviet leadership politics, the visit underscores Dobrynin's status as a key player on a broad range of East-West issues while marking a new public role for him in Moscow's dealings with its East European allies. Given the persistent rumors that Dobrynin may replace Shevardnadze, both the Afghanistan and the East Berlin trips may have been designed to heighten Dobrynin's visibility as a spokesman for the leadership on an increasingly broad range of foreign policy issues. [redacted]

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East German Handling of the Visit

7. Signs of strain and a distinct GDR coolness are evident in official East German reporting on Dobrynin's meeting with Honecker. If Dobrynin had conveyed a message that Honecker found to his liking, there would have been a much more positive media rendition of their meeting. The GDR leader "warmly reciprocated" the fraternal greetings sent by Gorbachev but otherwise--contrary to normal practice--there was no characterization of the meeting's atmosphere or the degree of cordiality in the exchange. [redacted]

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8. Honecker, according to our reading of GDR media reporting, used the occasion to restate forcefully a number of East German policies that have been sources of friction with the Soviets in the past.

- He reiterated the "active contribution" of the East Germans to the quest for peace by virtue of efforts to promote "dialogue" with "all forces of reason and realism." Since the INF deployments of 1983, this phrasing has been shorthand for asserting the "role of small states" in furthering detente. More specifically, this claim is aimed at promoting intra-German relations.
- He declared that "there must be no return to the situation before Reykjavik." Although East Berlin has dutifully blasted the United States for its commitment to SDI, GDR commentary has repeatedly stressed the obligation of both superpowers to return to the negotiating table. The technologically advanced GDR

³ Dobrynin, however, was not promoted to Politburo status at the January 1987 Central Committee plenum as had been rumored. [redacted]

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most likely fears being sucked into the Soviet counter-SDI effort that will make an increasing Soviet claim on scarce East German resources.

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-- Finally, Honecker forcefully stated that his way of doing things was working--a pointed reminder to the Soviets that, despite uneasiness with such Gorbachev policies as glasnost, the GDR is fulfilling Moscow's demand for high levels of economic performance while maintaining order and stability. Such an assertion would be even more pointed if unconfirmed reports that the Soviets want Honecker to step down are true.

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Outlook

9. Early Soviet media reporting on the FRG elections attributes the decline in voter support for the Christian Democrats to a rejection of Kohl's backing of US arms control policies and his allegedly "anti-Soviet" posture. The Soviets clearly welcome the strong showing of the Free Democrats and the increased prominence of Foreign Minister Genscher, who is as an advocate of better West German relations with the USSR. For the next month or so, the Soviets probably will adopt a wait-and-see attitude towards Bonn as they determine the pace and direction of any new West German initiatives. They will also look for subtle ways to build up Genscher in place of Kohl as the most appropriate interlocutor with Moscow.

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10. In this context, Moscow will monitor intra-German relations even more closely and send frequent warnings to ensure that East Berlin sends no signals that run counter to the Soviet game plan. From East Germany's perspective, the Dobrynin visit is likely to increase friction with the Soviets. The East Germans--who already are at odds with the Soviets on a range of economic and political issues, including a visceral dislike for Gorbachev's policy of glasnost--would be very unhappy with an extended, Soviet-mandated chill on intra-German relations. They have made clear their readiness to deal with Kohl and have a list of short-term economic goals--for example, the West German-financed electrification of railroad lines--which they would resent sacrificing to Soviet political objectives.

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11. On balance, however, Honecker will remain wary of pushing the Soviets too far, especially on core issues such as intra-German relations. He has nonetheless signaled his intention of promoting East German interests, even though he is

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aware that intransigence on relations with Bonn could cost him his job--as it did for his predecessor Walter Ulbricht. [redacted]

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12. High-level bilateral meetings over the next six months will provide an opportunity to assess the ability of both sides to manage the tensions in their relationship and to determine how rapidly such tensions are mounting.

- Shevardnadze arrives in East Berlin in early February and, among other things, probably will repeat Dobrynin's message.
- Gorbachev himself should visit East Berlin in June for a meeting with Honecker and other party chiefs at the annual meeting of the Warsaw Pact's Political Consultative Committee. [redacted]

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13. Other indicators of how well both sides are managing the frictions in their relationship would include, among others: -

- Increased unscheduled high-level meetings.
- Increasingly harsh Soviet rhetoric against West Germany, with or without support from East Berlin.
- Announcement of the signing of a significant number of Soviet-East German economic or scientific-technical agreements.
- Announcement of a Gorbachev or Honecker trip to the FRG. [redacted]

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SUBJECT: The Dobrynin Visit to East Berlin: More Than a Parish Call?

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