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Central Intelligence Agency



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CURRENT INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Gorbachev's Political Setback

Events in recent weeks suggest the Soviet leadership succession picture is less clear than it has seemed for most of Chernenko's tenure. In particular, Mikhail Gorbachev's status as heir apparent appears to be under challenge. This paper lays out the relevant data and discusses in speculative fashion three possible explanations for this development. The celebration on 7 November of the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution and the Central Committee meeting slated for late November will provide further clues to Gorbachev's political standing and prospects.

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Gorbachev, the Kremlin's agricultural overseer, failed to address the 23 October Central Committee plenum that dealt with agricultural issues. This was the clearest of a series of indications that the 53-year-old leader's position has come into question:

- o On 18 October at a Kremlin ceremony honoring Foreign Minister Andrey Gromyko, Secretary Gorbachev ranked below rival Secretary Grigoriy Romanov, according to a Pravda photograph.
- o The television coverage of that ceremony focused on a quartet consisting of Chernenko, Gromyko, Romanov, and Premier Nikolay Tikhonov, while Gorbachev was shown in the company of lower-ranking leaders.

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- o Pravda reported that on the same day Chernenko addressed the Politburo on personnel issues, an area in which Gorbachev reportedly has played a leading role.
- o On 27 September, Defense Minister Dmitriy Ustinov, not Gorbachev, presented Chernenko with an Order of Lenin, a duty that under Brezhnev and Andropov had fallen to the party's number two man.

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More recently, on 26 October Gorbachev failed to appear at a Kremlin dinner for the visiting Mongolian party leader while his chief rival Romanov attended the dinner and participated in the discussions.

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Voluntary Retreat?

A possible explanation of Gorbachev's downgrading is that it has resulted from a collective leadership campaign to bolster Chernenko in which Gorbachev has played a willing part. Since early September, when Chernenko resumed public appearances after a health-related absence of several weeks, some Politburo members have gone to unusual lengths to emphasize Chernenko's individual authority. Ustinov, for example, publicly described Chernenko as "Supreme Commander-in-Chief"--the first time since Stalin that the General Secretary has been so identified by another Politburo member. Soviet leaders may have felt it necessary to insist at the same time on a lower profile for Gorbachev, who had been described in the Western press earlier this year as "second General Secretary." The younger leader himself may have been willing to adopt a less prominent role in the interest of party unity and to convince Western governments and the Soviet public that Chernenko was firmly in charge. Gorbachev may have anticipated that, in light of Chernenko's chronic ill health, his own retreat from public prominence would only be temporary.

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Self-effacement of this sort, however, would entail risk for Gorbachev. Although few Soviet observers deny his abilities, some have questioned whether he has the necessary drive and ruthlessness to get to the top. Such doubts would almost certainly be strengthened were Gorbachev voluntarily to withdraw from the limelight and demonstrate a distaste for the infighting of Kremlin politics. It is unlikely, moreover, that Gorbachev would acquiesce in any personal retreat that made it appear he was being upstaged by Romanov.

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Blamed for Agricultural Performance?

It is more likely that Gorbachev's setback was related to agricultural issues. Some have suggested Gorbachev may have come out on the losing side in a dispute over agricultural policy. In

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his public statements, he has been cool to reliance on land reclamation, the focus of Chernenko's speech to the Central Committee plenum on 23 October, and instead emphasized more "cost-effective" solutions. In a speech on 26 March, Gorbachev criticized the approach of the Land Reclamation Ministry and urged that more resources be assigned to modernizing existing systems than to building new ones.

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The agricultural program unveiled at the plenum, however, does not appear to be inconsistent with Gorbachev's policy views. Although Chernenko's remarks emphasized increased investments, Tikhonov's speech--like Gorbachev's earlier statements--criticized the performance of land reclamation workers and the limited return achieved from earlier investments. It also highlighted the collective contract system for teams of agricultural and construction workers, an initiative Gorbachev has pushed. In fact, Tikhonov's speech could even have been drafted by Gorbachev's staff for Gorbachev to deliver. Thus a dispute over agricultural policy probably was not responsible for Gorbachev's setback.

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The agricultural issue more likely to have been involved is agriculture's poor performance. Although Gorbachev's career has advanced despite a series of below-average grain harvests, this year's crop--the sixth poor-to-mediocre one in a row--could be a different story. Gorbachev no longer enjoys the protection of past powerful patrons Brezhnev and Andropov, and Chernenko as well as others may have used agriculture's problems against him. In particular, Gorbachev may have fallen victim to a decision taken earlier this year to withhold military transport support from the grain harvest.

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Punishment for Running Out Front?

Poor agricultural performance alone, however, seems inadequate to explain Gorbachev's setback. Instead, it seems more likely that Gorbachev encountered the perennial problem of succession

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contenders who move ahead too fast. His frontrunner status probably made him particularly vulnerable to attack by his political rivals and may have caused problems in his relations with Chernenko and the older generation. In such a context, Gorbachev's elders and rivals could have made use of agricultural performance to hurt his political standing. They could also have played upon fears engendered in provincial party officials by the revival this summer of the discipline and anti-corruption drive. Gorbachev may have alienated some important local officials by acting as Andropov's agent in this area last year, [redacted]

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Gorbachev also may have been hurt by indiscreet comments by some of his backers. Pravda editor Afanasyev, talking to Japanese newspapermen in Moscow in mid-October, said that Gorbachev could be described as "the second General Secretary," and other high-level Soviet officials have called him the party's de facto second secretary. Such an identification, which would not have gone over well with Chernenko, could have resulted in a Politburo decision to bring Gorbachev down a notch. [redacted]

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Moreover, since the 23 October plenum, Soviet diplomats have been shying away from suggesting that Gorbachev has a lock on Chernenko's job. One even denied that a post of "second secretary" exists. [redacted]

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It is even possible that Gorbachev became incautious and actively sought to undermine Chernenko. This is unlikely, if only because Chernenko's poor health has probably persuaded Gorbachev that time is on his side. Still, Gorbachev may have become overconfident when filling in for Chernenko and overstepped the bounds in pushing himself to the fore. In late September, for example, his signature on the obituary of a retired senior military officer, which Chernenko failed to sign, may have made it appear that Gorbachev was usurping a function Chernenko would normally perform. The ceremonies at the opening of Moscow's version of the Olympic games also gave unusual prominence to Gorbachev, making him appear--in Chernenko's absence--the Politburo's leader. [redacted]

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Prospects

If, as seems likely, Gorbachev's setback is the result of political factors, his chances for recovery will greatly depend on the strength and cohesiveness of those forces recently aligned against him. His downgrading so far has been a plus both for Chernenko and for other would-be succession contenders, especially Romanov. It would be premature, however, to speak of a Chernenko-Romanov alliance. Chernenko is unlikely to find it to his own

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advantage to do too much to strengthen Romanov's succession prospects.

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Romanov himself, although undoubtedly benefitting from Gorbachev's setback, may also be wary of allying himself too closely with the aged and sick Chernenko or with other Politburo elders who may quickly leave the political scene. His reluctance may be all the greater if he perceives that Chernenko, Tikhonov, and other Politburo elders are determined to resist any real sharing of power with younger leaders. In recent weeks there have been indications that Chernenko's comeback has been assisted not only by his traditional allies, but also by Ustinov and Gromyko, former Andropov supporters whose antipathy toward Chernenko may have been overcome by generational loyalties and by their current enjoyment of unprecedented personal power. It was Ustinov who described Chernenko as Supreme Commander-in-Chief, and Gromyko embraced the General Secretary when Chernenko awarded him the Order of Lenin.

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Gorbachev's setback, therefore, may be only temporary. According to the French media, Politburo candidate Ponomarev confidentially told participants at a French Embassy reception on 26 October that Gorbachev had chaired the plenum, a role consistent with that of "second secretary." Chernenko may still find it in his interest to cooperate with him, and the younger leader may be able to profit from divisions among rivals and critics. The early November celebration of the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution and the Central Committee meeting slated for late November will provide additional evidence about his political position.

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Beyond these immediate considerations, Chernenko's resurgence suggests that the succession process is likely to be a long drawn-out affair. Chernenko's age, health, and dependence on his colleagues will likely prevent him from ever really consolidating his power. If his health holds, however, he and his elderly colleagues--Ustinov, Tikhonov, Gromyko--apparently intend to stay in power as long as possible. This could put off the transfer to a new leader until after the next party congress, which normally would be held early in 1986. Thus the overall succession process--the selection of a new leader followed by a period of power consolidation--probably will last for most of this decade.

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