

March 3, 1989

Record of Conversation between President M. S. Gorbachev and Miklós Németh 12 , Member of the HSWP CC Politburo, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the People's Republic of Hungary

Citation:

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Summary:

Record of Conversation between President M. S. Gorbachev and Miklós Németh 12 , Member of the HSWP CC Politburo, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the People's Republic of Hungary regarding the establishment of a multiparty system in Hungary

Original Language:

Russian

Contents:

Translation - English

(EXCERPT)

M. S. Gorbachev congratulates Németh on the occasion of his appointment as Prime Minister, and asks him how long he has been in office.

M. Németh: For almost a hundred days. I am often asked whether I am thinking about reviewing and sizing up what I have done so far. I usually answer that I have no time for that. Even if I make an assessment, it is for the Central Committee or the parliament. One has to be critical of one's own activities.

M. S. Gorbachev: True enough. In the single-party system self-criticism, is supposed to be an important issue. Possibly the most significant condition is how successfully the leading role of the Party is achieved. On the other hand, our mistakes and shortcomings are all rooted in the lack of criticism. Naturally, I am not only talking about the management, the top layer of party leaders, but I mean it on a larger scale—the whole of the Party. During the Stalin regime, from 1934 to his death, there were only two party congresses.

M. Németh: In the days when Lenin was at the helm, there were endless debates and a clear political line was formed all the same.

M. S. Gorbachev: Yes, because there were entirely different conditions both in the Party and in the country. Now we are opening the way towards socialist pluralism. The multiplicity of opinions is not a tragedy for the society; on the contrary, it is a real advantage. Of course, there are some who want to exhibit democracy for their own selfish objectives, but it can be dealt with, it is merely a question of struggle. [Boris] Yeltsin has now a peculiar position in the Central Committee. His is a typically leftist, rather obnoxious position, which can nevertheless find a favorable reception among the public. We have to put up with several problems that directly concern people's lives, and those who cry out loud enough about these can reap a dividend. The majority of people cannot be blamed for this, as they are hoping that a man like him will one day be able to do something for them. Besides, it is important that they learn on their own the difference between a demagogue and a serious politician. There is nothing flattering I can say about a member of the Central Committee who gambles at the expectations, while he knows very well that the party program is aiming at the quickest possible way of satisfying these expectations.

M. Németh: It happens quite often with us. There are always a few members of parliament who rise to speak from such a demagogic position.

M. S. Gorbachev: The main thing is to be honest and truthful in the Central Committee, in the parliament, and among the people as well, and to have a clear conscience. Otherwise the personality will break down, and downfall is unavoidable.

M. Németh: What we consider the most important task for the time being is creating a majority within the Central Committee that can be joined around a unified program.

M. S. Gorbachev: This, of course does not rule out the possibility of the existence of some kind of left-wing or right-wing views.

M. Németh: Yes, the only important thing is that the center be strong.

M. S. Gorbachev: We are for a majority that relies on democratic development. We would like to revitalize the role of the councils, agitate the activity of MPs, and assure complete publicity. Without these, the real power of the workers

does not exist. See what we had before in the past: masses of the people were alienated from property, politics, and culture. Yet the principal goal of socialism is overcoming alienation and putting man in the focus of attention.

M. Németh: I see no difference between pluralism in a single-party system and in a multi-party system. You are absolutely right: if there is freedom of thought and a unified program according to which people behave, everything goes on as it should. In May 1988 we laid the foundations for such a practice in the course of the Party Conference. Nonetheless, there were certain illusions.

M. S. Gorbachev: Experience showed us that nothing could be achieved at the first trial. We have to get back to the accepted agreements and decisions, polish them, make them more precise, and then move on.

M. Németh: Yes, the conditions are changing. Theoretically what you said in Kiev is important for us. Every socialist country is developing in its idiosyncratic way, and their leaders are above all accountable to their own people. Whether it be one party or more—life will show which solution is more effective. Within our conditions, state and party have become the same. This affected the development of the country in a most unfavorable way. We should not eradicate everything with one stroke, because what we achieved is worth noting.

M. S. Gorbachev: I believe that Pozsgay's statements are quite extremist in this respect. The events of 1956 indeed started with the dissatisfaction of the people. Later, however, the events escalated into a counterrevolution and bloodshed. This cannot be overlooked.

M. Németh: Most important of all, these questions should not cause division in the society. Some say that we need to look at history in the same way, because otherwise there will be no unity in society at all. In reality, however, unity in interpreting the past does not exist. The main thing is that we have unity with regard to the present situation and in the policy to follow.

M. S. Gorbachev: Indeed, every generation is responsible for the present, first and foremost.

M. Németh: I am convinced that the organic interrelation and conformity of the economy and politics in fundamental issues is indispensable. A principal question is that of pace. We Hungarians started economic reform long ago, while leaving the political institutions intact. Since last May, we have witnessed a rapid development and transformation of the political system. A new election system, the reorganization of parliament, and other measures followed one another in such a rapid succession, the wheels of the machine are turning with such dizzying speed that it could pose a potential danger to society if this process interrupted economic development.

Nobody actually doubts that a democratic constitutional state is unavoidable for a successful people's economy to function. Having only that, though, without a productive economy, then political transformations will happen in a void, *l'art pour l'art*. Pozsgay says that there is nothing wrong with politics superseding the economy. We, on the contrary, think that harmonization of the two is needed. We support and develop economic institutions, in parallel with changes in the political sphere. We will act with responsibility.

M. S. Gorbachev: You have touched upon an important issue. The process of renewal is gradually spreading over the entire socialist bloc, and adds to the political culture and historical experiences of all these countries according to the local conditions. The most important for all of them, however, is turning towards the people and

revitalizing the socialist system. While listening to you, our own situation came to my mind. Of course, it is difficult to achieve total synchronicity between politics and the economy, but at least we have to try. You might remember what Lenin used to say: "We Bolsheviks have conquered Russia, so now we have to learn how to govern it." They rushed ahead in politics, which was in itself normal at the time. But you are right: if we fail to utilize the political drives and motivations to create a healthy economy, the people will unavoidably become discontented.

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