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Soviet Record of Conversation between M. S. Gorbachev and the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), Egon Krenz

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Summary:

Soviet record of conversation between M. S. Gorbachev and the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), Egon Krenz concerning the possible reunification of Germany and issues faced by both the Soviet Union and the GDR

Original Language:

Russian

Contents:

Translation - English

Gorbachev: The Soviet people are very interested in everything that is going on now in the GDR. We hope to get the most recent information from you, although, of course, we know a lot. The situation in the GDR, judging by everything we see, is moving at an increasing speed. Is there a danger of getting left behind the reforms? Remember, we said in Berlin [2] that to be behind is always to lose. We know that from our own experience.

[...] I cannot tell you that we have already “broken in the horse of perestroika,” which turned out to be quite restless. In any case, we have not completely tamed it yet. Sometimes it even tries to throw the rider off. But we have gained very valuable experience.

Krenz: [...] At the Politburo we came to the conclusion that the crisis has not emerged [just] in the last several months. Many problems have accumulated over the years.

But the main mistake was probably that we did not make serious conclusions based on the new processes of social development, which began in the Soviet Union, other socialist countries, and which were ripe in the GDR itself. Because if you have the most important ally, you have to understand and share its problems and hardships. One cannot declare friendship in words, and at the same time stay on the sidelines when your ally is trying to deal with its difficult problems. People who are used to thinking of us as close allies felt that suddenly we have lost our unity with the Soviet Union, and that we ourselves erected this barrier.

Gorbachev: From the political point of view, the situation is clear, but from a simply human standpoint-[it is] dramatic. I was also concerned about this. In general, I had good relations with Honecker, but it seemed recently as if he lost his vision. If he had been willing to make the necessary changes in policy on his own initiative 2 or 3 years ago, everything would have been different now. But apparently, he had undergone some kind of a shift, he ceased to see real processes in the world and in his own country. It was a personal drama, but because Honecker occupied a very high position, it grew into a political drama.

Krenz: Yes, you are right, it is a drama, and for me too, because Honecker brought me up, he was my political mentor.

Gorbachev: Some people now speculate about that, but I think you should not react to that.

Krenz: For Honecker the turn probably occurred exactly in 1985, when you were elected General Secretary of the CC CPSU. In you he saw a threat to his authority, because he considered himself the most dynamic political leader. He lost all touch with reality, and did not rely on the politburo collective. [SED CC Secretary for Economics Günter] Mittag and [SED CC Secretary for Ideology and Propaganda Joachim] Hermann did him a very bad service in this respect. The first as a strategist, and the second as an executive.

[...] Gorbachev: This is a familiar picture. Some time ago, when I already was a Politburo member, I practically did not know our budget. Once we were working with [Chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers and Politburo member] Nikolai Ryzhkov on some request of [former KGB chief and General Secretary Yuri V.] Andropov's having to do with budgetary issues, and we, naturally, decided that we should learn about them. But Andropov said: Do not get in there, it is not your business. Now we know why he said so. It was not a budget, but hell knows what.

[...] Gorbachev: We knew about your situation, about your economic and financial

ties with the FRG, and we understood how it all could turn out. For our part, we were carrying out our obligations to the GDR, including those on oil deliveries, even though some of it had to be reduced at a certain time. Erich Honecker was not very honest with us about those things. We knew about that, but we exercised reserve and patience, led by the highest political considerations.

Krenz: It is very important to define the division of labor between the GDR and the Soviet Union better. It is one of our main reserves. The situation here is far from ideal. We need to remove the existing barriers. There should be only one criterion—efficiency and mutual benefit.

Gorbachev: The issue of the division of labor stands as a major problem in our country as well. The republics that produce raw materials demand a redistribution of money, because they think that those that produce finished products get too much. They present very harsh conditions, up to the limiting and stopping of deliveries.

By the way, yesterday in the Supreme Soviet one of the deputies—[reform economist] Nikolai Shmelev—raised the question about getting the real information about all our foreign economic relations, including the relations with the socialist countries, to the Supreme Soviet.

Krenz: We are prepared to discuss seriously those issues once again with our Soviet comrades.

Gorbachev: I suggested the topic of cooperation to Honecker many times. He was in favor of direct connections, but spoke about cooperation and especially about joint ventures without any enthusiasm. But it is precisely cooperation that had the greatest potential for mutual benefit. You cannot ride on the deliveries of our raw materials all the time. There are some strict limits here.

[...] Gorbachev: Yesterday Alexander N. Yakovlev received [former US National Security Adviser] Zbigniew Brzezinski, who, as you know, has a head with “global brains.” And he said: If today the events turned out in such a way that unification of Germany became a reality, it would mean a collapse of many things. I think so far we have held the correct line: stood firmly in favor of the coexistence of two German states, and as a result, came to a wide international recognition of the GDR, achieved the Moscow Treaty, gave a boost to the Helsinki Process. Therefore we should confidently follow this same course.

You must know: all serious political figures—[British Prime Minister Margaret] Thatcher, [French President François] Mitterrand, [Italian Prime Minister Giulio] Andreotti, [Polish President Wojciech] Jaruzelski, and even the Americans—though their position has recently exhibited some nuances—are not looking forward to German unification. Moreover, in today's situation it would probably have an explosive character. The majority of Western leaders do not want to see the dissolution of NATO and of the Warsaw Treaty Organization. Serious politicians understand that they are factors of a necessary equilibrium. However, Mitterrand feels like he has to mention his sympathy for the idea of the German unification. The Americans are also speaking about such sympathies for the Germans' pull toward the unification. But I think that they do it as a favor to Bonn, and also because to some extent, they are anxious about too much rapprochement between the FRG and the USSR. Therefore, I repeat, the best course of action now is to continue the same line in the German affairs which we have successfully developed so far. By the way, [former FRG Chancellor and SPD leader] Willy Brandt shares this opinion as well. He believes that the GDR is a great victory of socialism, even though he has his own understanding of socialism. A liquidation of the republic, in his opinion, would have been a bust for the Social Democrats. Therefore, I think, we all should start from the following formula: history itself decided that there should be two German states. But

of course, you cannot get away from the FRG. The need for human contacts presumes normal relations with the FRG. You should not disrupt your ties with the FRG, although, certainly, they should be kept under control.

I am convinced that we should coordinate our relations with the FRG better, although Honecker tried to evade this necessity. We know about your relations with the FRG, and you know about our relations with it. Why should we try to hide anything from each other! It would make sense to talk about the possibilities of trilateral cooperation between the USSR, the GDR, and the FRG, especially in the economic sphere. [...]

The situation in Hungary and Poland today is such that they have nowhere else to go, as they say, because they have drowned in financial dependence on the West. Today some people criticize us: they say, what is the Soviet Union doing—allowing Poland and Hungary to “sail” to the West[?] But we cannot take Poland on our balance. [Former Polish leader Edward] Gierek accumulated \$48 billion dollars of debt. Poland has already paid off \$49 billion, and it still owes almost \$49 billion. As far as Hungary is concerned, the International Monetary Fund has dictated its harsh ultimatum already under the late Hungarian leader Janós Kádár.

Krenz: This is not our way.

Gorbachev: You need to take this into account in your relationship with the FRG.

[...] Gorbachev: We need to think through all of this, and to find formulas that would allow people to realize their human needs. Otherwise we will be forced to accept all kinds of ultimatums. Maybe we can direct our International Departments and Foreign Ministries to think about possible initiatives together. Clearly, your constructive steps should be accompanied with demands for certain obligations from the other side. Chancellor Helmut Kohl keeps in touch with me and with you. We need to influence him. Once under the pressure of the opposition, he found himself on the horse of nationalism. The right wing starts to present their demands for the unification of Germany to the Soviet Union, and appeals to the US. The logic is simple—all the peoples are united, why do we Germans not have this right?

Krenz: We have already taken a number of steps. First of all, we gave orders to the border troops not to use weapons at the border, except in the cases of direct attacks on the soldiers. Secondly, we adopted a draft of Law on Foreign Travel at the Politburo. [3] We will present it for a public discussion, and we plan to pass it in the Volkskammer even before Christmas. [...]

Gorbachev: Kohl was visibly worried when I mentioned the perverse interpretation of some of our agreements with the FRG in my 8 October speech in Berlin. He immediately gave me a telephone call regarding that.

Krenz: Yes, he is worried; I noticed it in my conversation with him. He was even forgetting to finish phrases.

Gorbachev: Kohl, it seems, is not a big intellectual, but he enjoys certain popularity in his country, especially among the petit-bourgeois public.

[...] Gorbachev: I was told that he [Honecker] did not adequately understand even our discussions in the Politburo. But we do not have any ill feelings towards him. Had he made the right conclusions two or three years ago, it would have been of major significance for the GDR, and for him personally. In any case, one cannot deny the things your Party and people have achieved in the past. We have a complete mutual

understanding about that.

Krenz cordially thanks Gorbachev for the support, openness, and good advice.

[1] See also the German version of this conversation, published in CWIHP Bulletin 12/13.

[2] Gorbachev had visited East Berlin in early October for the 40th GDR Anniversary.

[3] See the article by Hans-Hermann Hertle in CWIHP Bulletin 12/13.