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Record of Conversation Between Mikhail Gorbachev and Prime Minister of Great Britain Margaret Thatcher

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Summary:

Gorbachev and Thatcher discuss reforms in the Soviet Union and issues with inter-ethnic tensions. Thatcher states that she is not in support of German unification.

Original Language:

Russian

Contents:

Translation - English

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Thatcher. [...] I know that it is not easy to carry out a political reform. You began to implement the reform from the above, and it would be impossible otherwise. Here, as I understand, you are in full control of the situation. But to carry out an economic reform is even more difficult, I know this from my own experience. [...]

You have now reached the stage where every new step is more difficult than the previous one. It is important for people to see results, even though it is a politically ungratifying task. For instance, I had to wait for two years before the first results. All this time I was criticized, and when the success came, it was received as something natural, and nobody thanked me. How much time would you need to get the first results? Two years or less?[...]

[...] Thatcher. But you need to teach the people to live day by day, not on future credits.

Gorbachev. We are teaching, teaching with life.

If you add to what we have just said the fact that these processes are unfolding in the country with 120 nationalities and ethnicities, you can imagine what a tight knot all the problems present together. As you know, the Plenum of the CC CPSU that has just ended analyzed the issues of inter-ethnic relations in depth. The Plenum's resolutions are very important. Their essence is to balance the nationalities policy, to rejuvenate the Soviet federation and to fill it with a real meaning. I will tell you honestly, so far our state was considered federal only formally, and in reality everything worked like in a typical unitary state - from the top to the bottom. The decisions of this Plenum are supposed to change that, to create mechanisms which in practice would help to remove the tensions from the inter-ethnic relations without interfering with basic interests of individuals, of the nationalities, and of the society in the economic, cultural, and other spheres. Otherwise, the inter-ethnic tensions could bury perestroika. This is how the issue stands now.

I would also like to state openly the following thought. Sometimes I hear, even here in the West: why do we have to open up so many fronts simultaneously? But how can you reform the economy without a reform of the political system? It will not work. And we already have the sad experiences with Khrushchev, and Kosygin with Brezhnev. How can you reform both the economy and the politics without democratization of the society, without glasnost, which incorporate individuals into an active socio-political life? It will not work either. How can you make prognoses and form healthy inter-ethnic relations separately from the economic, political, and democratic reforms in the society as a whole? How can you carry out perestroika itself without rejuvenating the party?

All these issues are inseparably linked, and that is why we are saying that perestroika is not just a reform, it is a genuine revolution, our second socialist revolution. And we are making great efforts to carry it out.

[...] Thatcher. I would like to raise the issue of the situation in the countries of Eastern Europe. I was very impressed by the courage and patriotism of General Jaruzelski in Poland. Of course, for you, the future of Poland and its alliance with you have a big significance. I noted that you calmly accepted the results of the elections in Poland, and, in general, the processes in that country and in other East European countries. I understand your position in the following way: you are in favor of each country choosing its own road of development so long as the Warsaw Treaty is intact. I perfectly understand this position.

Now I would like to say something in a very confidential manner, and I would ask you not to record this part of the conversation.

Gorbachev. As you would like.

(The following part of the conversation is recorded from recollections)

Thatcher. We are very concerned with the processes that are underway in East Germany. It is on the verge of big changes, which are caused by the situation in the society and to some extent by Erich Honecker's illness. The thousands of people who escape from the GDR to the FRG are the primary example. All that is the external side of things, and it is important for us, but another issue is even more important.

Britain and Western Europe are not interested in the unification of Germany. The words written in the NATO communique may sound different, but disregard them. We do not want the unification of Germany. It would lead to changes in the post-war borders, and we cannot allow that because such a development would undermine the stability of the entire international situation, and could lead to threats to our security.

We are not interested in the destabilization of Eastern Europe or the dissolution of the Warsaw Treaty either. Of course, the internal changes are ripe in all the countries of Eastern Europe, but in some countries they are more pronounced, in some countries not yet. However, we are in favor of those processes remaining strictly internal, we will not interfere in them and spur the de-communization of Eastern Europe. I can tell you that this is also the position of the U.S. President. He sent a telegram to me in Tokyo, in which he asked me to tell you that the United States would not undertake anything that could threaten the security interests of the Soviet Union, or that could be perceived by the Soviet society as a threat. I am fulfilling his request.

Gorbachev. Thank you for the information. In general, you formulated our position correctly. We think that the socialist countries should make their own decisions about their internal affairs, they should be able to choose which road and which tempo to take in the implementation of their socialist choice. We do not want to, and we will not, interfere in these processes, but, of course, we were helping, and we will be helping our friends and allies.

As far as Erich Honecker's health is concerned, he is planning to participate in all the events commemorating the 40th anniversary of the GDR. I can inform you that I am planning to visit the GDR on the 6th and 7th of October for the celebration of the anniversary.

Thatcher. Thank you.
The confidential part of my talk is over, now you can resume recording.

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