

Document 6. Record of Conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and Members of the  
CC SED Politburo  
October 7, 1989

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Gorbachev: In this connection, I would like to return to the 1970s. Then everybody in the world acutely felt the challenges of the scientific and technological revolution. We all remember how energetic the West's actions were in adjusting to it. By the way, they did so without taking the interests of the working class into account. At that time we had a pointed discussion of those urgent issues in the CPSU. It was then that the thesis appeared that if we did not latch on to scientific and technological developments socialism would lose. The processes causing us to lag behind became so apparent that L. I. Brezhnev agreed that it was necessary to hold a special Plenum of the CC CPSU devoted to the problems of accelerating scientific and technological progress in the USSR. We are not going to talk about the specific reasons why that Plenum was never held. It was a miscalculation. It was a strategic miscalculation, and we are still feeling the consequences of it. You approached those problems differently in the GDR. I could see that myself when I studied your experiences with economic reform in 1966 here.

In the 1970s you understood the challenge of the times, and actively responded to it. And that was correct, it allowed you to do many things. These are two examples of different reactions to the needs of social development which require a transformation in the party's practical policy.

This has direct relevance to our perestroika. Where the party is lagging behind the times in theoretical and practical terms, there we have to harvest bitter fruit. You all know how inter-ethnic conflicts and passions have flared up in our country recently. Inter-ethnic problems are very complex. There are many issues interwoven there: economics, demographics, problems of sovereignty, history, the traditions of separate peoples. We had to present society with thoroughly developed approaches to these problems. But while we were working intensively on those problems, which of course took some time, other forces were planting poisonous seeds in the soil of inter-ethnic relations. And only when we passed the platform of inter-ethnic policy at the September [19-20] Plenum of the CC CPSU did society calm down in a certain way. The people got clear signals that allowed them to consolidate the social forces.

[...] You know, it was important for me to hear everything here because our perestroika is also a response to the challenge of the times. In the end we, communists, think about what we are leaving behind and what we are preparing for the generations to come.

I did say to Erich [Honecker], however, that it seems that it would be much easier for you than for us. You do not experience such tensions in the socio-economic sphere. But to make a decision to undertake political reforms is also not an easy thing to do. In the future you will have to make courageous decisions. I am speaking from our own experience. Remember, Lenin used to say that in turbulent revolutionary years people get more experience in weeks and months than sometimes in decades of normalcy. Our perestroika led us to the conclusion that the revolutionary course would not receive working class support if living standards did not improve. But it turned out that the problem of sausage and bread is not the only one. The people demand a new social atmosphere, more oxygen in the society, especially because we are talking about a socialist regime. I am saying this to

remind you of the problems we face at home. Figuratively speaking, people want not only bread but entertainment, too. If you take it in a general sense, we are talking about the necessity of building not only a material but a socio-spiritual atmosphere for the development of society. I think this is a lesson for us. It is important not to miss our chance here. The party should have its own position on these issues, its own clear policy in this respect also. Life itself will punish us if we are late. By the way, in this connection, we have moved up the dates of the XXVIII Congress of the CPSU [to July 2, 1990].

There is an understanding in society--the state of affairs in the society will determine [the timing].

[...]

From our own experience, from the experience of Poland and Hungary, we saw that if the party pretends that nothing special is going on, if it does not react to the demands of reality, it is doomed. We are concerned about the fate of the healthy forces in Hungary and Poland, but it is not easy to help them. They have given up their positions. The positions were given up because they could not provide a timely response to the demands of reality, and the processes took a painful turn. The Polish comrades did not use the opportunities that opened up for them in the beginning of the 1980s. And in Hungary, at the very end of his life Kádár deeply regretted that he did not do what he could and should have done in time. So, we have only one choice--to move decisively ahead, otherwise we will be defeated.

It is even more true, if you keep in mind as we have already mentioned, Erich, that they are already rubbing their hands waiting for social revenge on a global scale, for a constricting of the socialist sphere. It makes it even more important not to slow down--that would mean defeat.

The CPSU and the Socialist Unity Party of Germany, as the most powerful of the fraternal parties, have an opportunity not only to strengthen their authority but to widen it on the basis of the original principles from which they were created, and in the name of our ideals, the ideals of October. Now is a good moment for you to act. And what could more important for communists than the future of our movement! We, for our part, are ready to be with you in the future, to cooperate closely and constructively. In this we are open to you without any reservations.

[...]

Gorbachev: The miners taught a good lesson to the secretary of the Donetsk Regional Party Committee. At the enterprises workers were saying right in the shop: why is it that the leaders of the country and of the party care about the workers, are interested in their feelings--the new minister paid a visit recently, for example--but they had no water in the workers' town for two weeks, and they could not get the chairman of the local Executive Committee to come? It is no surprise that the workers actively supported certain communists, but demanded that others be immediately replaced. And we often see that some leaders cannot pull the cart any more, but we don't dare replace them, we are afraid to offend them. Meanwhile, the problems grow and become very painful. In short, there are many "warning bells" for the party.

[Source: Archive of the Gorbachev Foundation, Fond 2. Opis 1. On file at the National Security Archive. Translated by Svetlana Savranskaya.]