

Document No. 6. Record of Conversation between M.S. Gorbachev and Willy Brandt

Moscow, October 17, 2009

**Gorbachev:** I warmly welcome Mr. Brandt and his colleagues to Moscow. Our meetings are becoming a tradition and are an important element in our foreign policy. I am pleased to say that we understand each other. This is important not only to our bilateral relations, but to all of Europe.

**Brandt:** I agree. I think the meetings are important to both sides. I would like to convey greetings from my colleagues at the Presidium of the Socialist International as well as from the FRG, not only from my party but also from Mr. Kohl. I met with the chancellor a couple days before my trip to Moscow. He paid more attention to your praises in Berlin than your criticisms. Your June visit to the FRG is still fresh in our minds, it was a major event. I was not the only one who watched your visit to the GDR with interest and enormous respect. Your comments were heard with great attention over there.

Allow me to introduce my colleagues. Egon Bahr visits Moscow often...

**Gorbachev:** Is that a criticism? A meeting with Egon Bahr is a normal thing for us.

**Brandt:** Hans Koschnik is Chairman of the SPD Foreign Policy Committee; Gerhard Schroeder from Lower Saxony, a former *Komsomol* [member] who is now grown up (*animation in the room*).

**Gorbachev:** I know from personal experience that *Komsomol* [members] grow up too.

**Brandt:** Tomorrow Schroeder is planning to fly to Kazakhstan. You know that we are interested in issues of ethnically German Soviet citizens. I want to say at the outset that it is in our interest that they stay in the Soviet Union and keep their cultural identity. It would be good if some of the people who have already immigrated to the FRG would return.

**Gorbachev:** Talking with you is both easy and hard for us. Easy because the level of mutual understanding allows us to communicate like friends, openly, discussing any subject. But it is difficult because we cannot gloss over problems with general phrases.

I am under the impression—I am even convinced—that the deep changes taking place in socialist countries, as well as the processes in social-democratic parties, are bringing us closer to each other. If we say that in our interdependent world we have to find ways to live in concord with any country, regardless of its choices, then it is necessary to collaborate and seek new ties with the social democrats on questions of peace as well as on finding resolutions to various social issues. It is in your and our interest that *perestroika* succeed in our country. In the grand scheme of things, this affects everyone who is devoted to socialism. We feel the solidarity and understanding from your side. [...]

We have a great deal in common, and our common ground is growing. We should pay careful attention to each other in our search for socialist prospects in socialist countries and social democratic parties. Through this process we will be able to offer the world very important opinions and our view of civilization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These are preliminary remarks.

**Brandt:** I would like to support your point: it is very important for *perestroika* to succeed. I would be grateful if you would tell us what you expect from the so-called West and from us, the social democrats, who belong mostly to the West, in terms of helping *perestroika*. There is talk that socialism is “over,” outdated. But I believe that from a historical point of view we are dealing with a new beginning, with a new type of socialism in a very large part of the world.

Yesterday we met with Soviet scholars of social democracy. We talked about programs. If we take a developed society, its economy cannot reject market elements. On the other hand, the processes of internationalization suggest solutions that are far from liberalist in nature.

We tried to find the common denominator for the various parties in Western Europe, Latin America, and other parts of the world. Not everything worked out as we would have liked it to. But the most important point is to outline the program for new developments in our basic values.

We do not want to give off the impression that everything that took place between us in the past is cleared up and worked out. We are already close neighbors in the spirit of new thinking; it is time for us to increase our practical and pragmatic collaboration. I agree with you that alongside issues of war and peace—which are the first priority—we should work together in other spheres, which would allow us to reach a new level of relations. Of course, the creation of a practical partnership does not rule out further exchange on questions of basic values. [...]

**Gorbachev:** You could say about our collaboration that it is becoming concrete, and not only in foreign affairs. This was our aim when we allowed a representative office of the [Friedrich] Ebert Foundation to be opened in Moscow.

We consider it useful to conduct intensive exchanges on the pressing issues of socialism, such as the problems of the Scientific-Technical Revolution, ecology, information, etc. We welcome your suggestion to create an exchange on these issues, including the visit of the vice-chairmen of the Socialist International.

We have not clarified everything, there is still a great deal to be worked out. The more so since we are truly in the process of understanding our past experiences and looking for ways to transition to new qualities. The political and theoretical activity in this sphere is growing in the party. [...]

As we work together our parties are enriched, while each maintains its own identity. We foster a process of better understanding. Perhaps it is time to consider what needs to be done to overcome the schism of 1914. Mr. Brandt, I recall your positive reaction to this idea in one of our previous meetings.

As for an article for the journal, it is an interesting idea. Something to think about.

What do we expect from the West in terms of *perestroika*? Understanding. We hope that the same mentality as in the previous decades won't prevail now—namely, when each acts according to the principal that whatever is worse for the other side is best for us.

The change taking place right now is too critical. I said to Mitterrand, Kohl, and Thatcher: it would be unacceptable for someone to behave like an elephant in a china shop right now. It would have ruinous consequences.

The majority of the world understands the positive meaning of *perestroika*. The social democrats and the Socialist International are acting responsibly when they express solidarity with us. We value the aspiration to understand our problems. We appreciated your, Mr. Brandt, address regarding particular aspects of our nationalities policy. We are talking about the emergence of a new trust. But we have to make *perestroika* ourselves. [...]

As for supplying us with some type of goods, I cannot see a particular desire for it, and dependency breeds more dependency. And why do we need this charity? It would be a different matter to have normal collaboration in the spheres of economy, ecology, culture. In a word, if we were to have a normal external environment for our domestic work.

Our biggest deficit right now is in active and adequate policies on all fronts. We often fall behind. At the same time we do not want to throw unripe fruit to our society, and the ripening takes time. This happened with our platform on the nationalities question. While we were thinking it through the problems continued to accumulate. We are still feeling the “residual” shocks from this “earthquake.” After a platform is accepted the processes follow more or less normal channels. And still there are people who tend to oversimplify the solutions. This is quite a dangerous crowd. We are hearing all kinds of ideas from the outside, which breeds confusion. I would call it a “poverty of philosophy.” They either suggest returning to where we started, to close down *perestroika*; or to break everything down with one sweep. This is the end of their intellectual potential! I would say this is both a “poverty of politics” and irresponsibility.

Working under extreme conditions leads to mistakes and a deficit of systematic approaches. When we gave our enterprises economic independence we did not think about mechanisms to contain this process in certain boundaries. We have even worse monopolies than you do. They name the price and there is nothing the consumer can do. Cash incomes are growing, but there is no increase in goods. In the past, the enterprises had to produce an

assortment of goods; this was required by the plan. Now it is not profitable, and the society has to go without goods. We did not think through everything here. We do not have a tax policy.

The situation is also difficult on the consumer market. There is a great deal of “bad” money. In the past, a 10-12 billion ruble increase in commodity circulation was considered normal, but last year it was 24 billion, this year it will reach 29 billion. And yet, the store shelves are empty. We have to relieve the tension in society, or there will be an escalation of critical views of *perestroika*. We cannot ignore the fact that these views exist.

Still, we do not lose sight of the main direction. Right now an entire complex of laws is being discussed in our country—regarding private property, land, rent, cooperation. This will be fundamental in changing our people’s situation. We are ready to use the experience of other countries, but the people who suggest simply copying someone else’s experience are making a big mistake. We always have to keep in mind the realities of our society and to bring forth processes that would make it change. This is what we are searching for.

[...] One thing is passing and another has not yet appeared. It is important not to lose sight of our reference points, not to slip into aimless drifting. We are living through a moment when the understanding crystallizes in society that the most important thing right now is constructive work. Slowly and with difficulty we are emerging from the stage of meetings. It brought up so many issues! But it was necessary. There would be no *perestroika* without it. Everybody got a chance to speak their mind. This enabled people to understand themselves.

Our society is not disposed to deep change as it is heavily burdened by the habits and ideas of the past. The practice of waiting for orders from the top has seeped into our blood; people have gotten out of the habit of responsibility. There is social leveling, which is interpreted as social justice. A massive demolition of these ideas is underway. [...]

Today we are more certain of success because we have more knowledge; we have reached the fundamental questions of private property, power, and culture. All of this is acquiring a qualitatively new substance. This is my report on *perestroika*.

*(Further the conversation was continued one on one.)*

**Gorbachev:** If we could alleviate the tension on the consumer market as soon as possible, many things would clear up. *Perestroika* is going through a very acute period. In our vast country there is an enormous variety of conditions. There is a buildup of very difficult problems. Our conscience is formed through dogmatism and conservatism. These are all large-scale obstacles. At the same time entering a new channel of development in the economy, politics, and social processes would have an immense significance for the country, for socialism, and for the world.

**Brandt:** I second this thought.

**Gorbachev:** I would like to confidentially convey our evaluation of the situation. The most important fact is that there is no alternative to *perestroika*. Everybody talks about various issues, but in the end nobody has provided any alternative to the current course of action. This means our strategy is right. The question is in tactics, priorities, the rate of change. There is a wide spread of opinions.

If the social tension keeps growing and living conditions deteriorate, then any match would set off an explosion. Therefore *perestroika's* fate depends on how we will be able to untie these knots—the market and finances. We have implemented a number of measures and we are working on additional strong measures to curb negative processes and bring the situation under control.

If you should summarize from a philosophical point of view all the opinions expressed today you would find everything from anarchism to monarchism. We have learned to be calm about this.

**Brandt:** One recalls the French writer Camus's idea that people must learn to see Sisyphus as a happy man.

**Gorbachev:** Someone sent me a souvenir that represents a hundred Hercules.

**Brandt:** This is almost the same idea.

**Gorbachev:** I came back from the GDR worried and alarmed. They are losing time. This country does quite a bit for its citizens. The issue, then, is that people want not only material and social benefits but to be able to realize their personal potential. In a conversation with my German comrades I said that I wish I had their kind of problems! Life itself is sending them signals, which they have to realize in their policies.

In Berlin I thought it necessary to react to certain passages from Kohl's Bremen speech. He seems to understand the reality of the situation. But his speech is dictated by the election: he wants to strike the SPD a blow by winning votes through nationalist positions. But nationalism is a dangerous thing. We see that in our country. That is why in my speech in Berlin I said that the Chancellor has deviated from the declaration accepted in Bonn. He understood this and called me a few days ago. It was not an easy conversation; we discussed a range of topics. The Chancellor hesitated to bring up the reason he called. Only when I started to thank him for the phone call did he speak about the GDR. He confirmed that the decisions of the Bonn Declaration are in force. He does not want to destabilize the situation in the GDR based on the existing agreements. I said that I took note of his statements.

Once again I come back to the point that during the time of these deep changes any kind of interference is unacceptable. I did not say this to the Chancellor but I will say it to you, because I see that we share a deep understanding of the problem. One way or another, what is

happening in the CDU is alarming Mitterrand and Thatcher. I sensed this in our last conversations. I am not sure about the Americans, but something seems to be happening there. I think the US is considering something along these lines: "what is happening between the FRG and the USSR could lead the Soviet Union to become the 'godfather' of German reunification." They might decide to take the lead. But these are only my theories based on observations. They are making some corrections to their line.

You and I have assumed realistic positions a long time ago, and they gave strong impetus to the processes in Europe and opened a new stage of collaboration.

**Brandt:** My wife, who is a historian, recently visited the United States. She met with a high level official from the State Department, the daughter of Ambassador Charles Bolen, who is known for Soviet-American relations in the post-war period. What she had to say was along the lines of the key to solving the German problem is in Moscow. The US does not know yet what will happen in the next round and how to react. Such is the message from America.

We do not like the fact that young people are leaving the GDR. The people who are leaving are by far not the worst layer of society, rather those who are already living better than the rest. Consequently, they are not moving the FRG out of material considerations! The reason is that the GDR government does not see them as citizens with the right to a voice. They say the number of émigrés is growing. A new self-awareness is emerging in the GDR. Something has to be decided over there. The government has to enter into a dialogue with the general public, not only with the block parties.

I would like to touch upon the issue of the two Germanys in the new European peacetime order. During your visit to Berlin we noted Gerasimov's rather important statement regarding the strategic factor related to the presence of Soviet troops in the GDR. This is an important point and we should speak frankly about it. It does not mean that there will be fewer troops there. But in relations between two of the largest powers it continues to be an important factor.

For a while I wanted to share the following thought with you. We cannot separate German affairs from European affairs. If the rest of Europe continues along the path of coming together and cohesion, then the two German states might discover more similarities in various spheres between themselves than with other countries. Perhaps it would be useful to show them a future possibility of making a kind of "common roof" to work together in these areas? This need not have anything to do with reunification. Personally I have been against using this term for a long time. Reunification means a return to the past, which is first of all impossible, and second of all is not our goal.

**Gorbachev:** Let us think about it. I think we understand that this question is not on the agenda today. Processes of integration are underway in Europe. The future will show what a unified Europe will look like. History has enough imagination. Not too long ago I received a

letter from a certain Todenhoefer from the CDU, it was almost an ultimatum. He sent similar messages to Bush, Thatcher, and Mitterrand.

**Brandt:** You should not take him seriously.

One more question. I do not think that it will become very important but I bring it up since we are having a frank discussion. A group of social democrats has formed in the GDR. They consider themselves a union, not a party. I do not know them personally but heard that they do not want to be an appendage of the SPD. Recently I received a letter from them, addressed to the Chairman of the Socialist International, and found myself in a difficult position. On the one hand, there is no possibility of accepting this union into the International. At the same time I cannot ignore such appeal. For now I decided to direct my Swedish friend to them, thereby letting them know that the SPD is not whom they need to turn to.

**Gorbachev:** What can I say... I think serious changes are beginning there. A Politburo session is taking place there today, which will probably be followed by a CC Plenum. They will discuss a broad dialogue between the Party and society, the population. I would advise to wait a little, so as not to interfere with processes at hand there. This is the time for care and restraint. Later you could evaluate the situation and the ongoing processes and develop an answer for them.

**Brandt:** I agree with you.

It would be very important for the GDR to change the situation in mass media.

**Gorbachev:** I agree.

**Brandt:** I am concerned about the situation in the Baltic States. I am in contact with our northern friends. Recently Koivisto and Passio visited Bonn. They said they intend to develop mutual relations between Finland and Estonia in the economic and cultural spheres—it helps that their languages are very similar—and refrain from any interference and creating difficulties.

The Swedish Prime Minister Carlsson assured me that in developing traditional relations with Latvia, which go back to the times of Livonia, Sweden does not intend to obstruct the Soviet Union. I think you do not have to worry about the position of these countries.

Matters are more difficult with Lithuania. She does not have a traditional partner in the North. In Denmark a demagogic competition flared up between the conservatives and the social democrats over leading the contact with Lithuania. I recommended to our comrades in Copenhagen to leave this matter. Hopefully they will listen to me.

The social democratic Ober-Burgomaster of the Ruhr city of Duisburg, which partners with Vilnius, will probably go there to evaluate the situation. We do not have much influence in that region. But I assure you, if we use what influence we have, it will only be in the interest of

calming the situation. Should the need arise, we could tell a certain someone: to question the USSR federation is to play with fire. Keeping the federation, on the other hand, opens broad opportunities to collaborate among the republics.

**Gorbachev:** This is truly the case. I communicate with the Baltic deputies a great deal. When I meet with them I try to convey one simple idea: we have never really lived together in a true federation. In other words, what used to be called a federation was a unitary state. Now the republics have economic independence and their sovereignty has real substance as we are giving them complete freedom to develop their culture, language, and self-dependence.

**Brandt:** Our time is running out. I wanted to touch upon a number of other questions related to European and global affairs. I think it would be better if I recorded them in a memo. I will send it to you with Falin.

**Gorbachev:** Sounds good. That would be very interesting for us.

I thank you for a substantive conversation and most importantly for the trust and human sympathy that have formed in our relations. Convey my greetings to members of the Socialist International leadership.

**Brandt:** Thank you.

[Source: *Mikhail Gorbachev i germanskii vopros: sbornik dokumentov 1986-1991*. Moscow: Ves' Mir, 2006, pp. 223-231. Translated by Anna Melyakova for the National Security Archive]