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TO : The Secretary *mf for*
FROM : INR - William G. Bowdler

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Soviet Trends No. 42

(S/WNTEL/NF/NC/OC) If Brezhnev Dies in Office

The report that Brezhnev suffered a stroke on October 17 remains for the moment neither confirmed nor disproven. This essay previews the likely events in Moscow if he should die suddenly.

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First, the Rumors

Brezhnev's death may be preceded, and certainly will be accompanied, by a blizzard of rumors in Moscow and in the West. The normally high level of concern of Moscow dissidents, among others, will intensify, and stories of harassment and repression, real or anticipated, should be expected. If the recent past is an indicator, we may expect breaches of discipline in some Soviet posts overseas and should regard with skepticism the more fanciful stories.

Politburo Meets

The first action after Brezhnev's death will be an urgent meeting of the Politburo members in Moscow. The first order of business will be to issue instructions to media officials on how to handle the news. TASS presumably will be empowered to make an announcement over radio and TV, when the Politburo has decided on its approach, and Pravda's front page will set the standard for the press.

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Security Arrangements

The security police and armed forces probably will be put on alert, with the police instructed to exert the utmost vigilance against possible disorders. The routine precaution may be unnecessary since Brezhnev's death is unlikely to result in public outbreaks. Nevertheless, police repression of political dissidents probably will increase in severity as a precautionary measure, and during the period of uncertainty local police officials are hardly likely to be particularly forthcoming to applicants for emigration.

Protocol Ceremonies

The Politburo's next act will be to name a funeral commission including top leaders of the party, government, military, and legislature. A Red Square funeral with interment in the Kremlin Wall appears likely. These and other protocol matters should appear on the front page of Pravda.

Public Indicators

Indications of how the Politburo intends to play the succession issue should appear perhaps within a week. This may come in a Politburo statement or in the convoking of a plenum of the CPSU Central Committee. The full Central Committee membership would not make the leadership choice but would be convened to legitimize the Politburo's decision.

The way in which Pravda handles leadership protocol in the public ceremonies is likely to reflect the background situation. Following the ouster of Khrushchev in October 1964, there was ambiguity in the Pravda handling of the relative status of Brezhnev and Kosygin. There was a similar ambiguity between 1953 and 1955 concerning Khrushchev and Malenkov. In the post-Brezhnev period we may again be in for a period during which political maneuvering is masked by the public media.

The Succession Issue

Meanwhile, within a day of the death, the out-of-Moscow members and the candidate members of the Politburo should have joined the Politburo in Moscow. Precedent is not clear on their possible participation in the choice of the new party leader.

There is no constitutional procedure for selecting the new party leader; as in the past, the Politburo members will make the selection on political grounds. It is, of course, not necessary for Brezhnev's party post to be filled immediately. Delay in naming the new incumbent would, in our opinion, work to Kirilenko's advantage since he has been filling this post during Brezhnev's absences. Suslov has also played this role during the absence of Kirilenko and Brezhnev, but we do not believe that he, almost 77, aspires to this post.

The initial political response will most likely be emphasis on collective leadership, with the senior positions being held by Suslov, Kosygin, Kirilenko, and Ustinov, and with Gromyko as the foreign policy technician being included in the senior group. What Chernenko's role will be once his political patron, Brezhnev, has departed is unclear.

Brezhnev's Other Jobs

The other posts held by Brezhnev--Chairman of the USSR Supreme Soviet Presidium (the "presidency") and Chairman of the Defense Council are products of his party leadership. These posts are not likely to be awarded immediately to the new party incumbent. They may be left unfilled for weeks or even months, or they may be parcelled out to other persons in moves designed to dilute the power base of the new party leader. The unofficial sobriquet of "head" of the Politburo is gained by the exercise of political leadership and is not formalized by the party statutes. Thus this designation probably will disappear from usage for some time.

Policy Effects

The initial Soviet response on all levels of the bureaucracy will be to pull back into self-protective postures until the outlines of the succession become clear. Current propaganda campaigns should run on momentum alone, but a hold may be put on any new disarmament proposals or major diplomatic moves. Soviet domestic programs, such as drawing up the next five-year plan and preparations for the 26th Party Congress (due in early 1981), would probably go into the freezer until the leadership picture was clarified.

Soviet purchases of grain from the US will proceed normally, based on need, regardless of Kremlin anxieties over the succession. Any disruption of shipments