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DOCUMENT No. 81: Transcript of Leonid Brezhnev's Telephone Conversation with Alexander Dubček, August 13, 1968

Source: APRF, Prot. No. 38; Vondrová & Navrátil, vol. 2, pp. 172-181.

On August 13, First Secretary Brezhnev called Dubček to admonish him to take immediate steps to reverse the Prague Spring reforms. A word-for-word transcription of this critical and dramatic conversation was apparently made possible by a KGB tape recording system which enabled Soviet leaders to keep track of important telephone calls.

In this conversation, Brezhnev adopts a far more aggressive and belligerent tone than in a call four days earlier. The transcript records him repeatedly accusing Dubček of "outright deceit" and of "blatantly sabotaging the agreements reached at Čierna and Bratislava." The Soviet leader also issues oblique warnings about "the emergence of an entirely new situation ... forcing [the Soviet Union] to consider new, independent measures that would defend both the CPCz and the cause of socialism in Czechoslovakia."

Midway through Brezhnev's attack, Dubček declares that he "would be content to go back to working at my old place," and step down as CPCz First Secretary. With apparent exasperation, he tells Brezhnev that "if you [on the Soviet Politburo] believe we're deceiving you, you should take the measures you regard as appropriate." "Such measures," Brezhnev responds, "would be easier for us to adopt if you and your comrades would more openly say that these are the measures you're expecting of us."¹

COMRADE L. I. BREZHNEV'S CONVERSATION WITH COMRADE A. S. DUBČEK²

13 August 1968

Start of the conversation: 5:35 p.m.

End of the conversation: 6:55 p.m.

BREZHNEV. Aleksandr Stepanovich, I felt the need to speak with you today. I called you early in the morning and then later in the day, but you were away the whole time in Karlovy Vary, and then you called me back, but at that point I had gone to have a talk with the comrades. Now that I've returned, they told me that you have a Presidium meeting going on, and so I hope I'm not greatly disturbing you by having this conversation.

DUBČEK. No, not at all, the comrades already told me that you wanted to speak with me. I just now got back from Karlovy Vary. I had a meeting there with Cde. Ulbricht.

BREZHNEV. How did the meeting go?

DUBČEK. I think it went well. Cde. Ulbricht and the comrades accompanying him returned today to the GDR, and I just finished seeing them off.

BREZHNEV. We have little time, and so let me get straight to the point. I'm again turning to you with anxiety about the fact that the mass media³ in your country not only are incorrectly depicting our conferences in Čierna nad Tisou and Bratislava, but are also stepping up their attacks against the healthy forces and continuing to purvey anti-Sovietism and anti-socialist ideas. What I'm referring to here are not some isolated instances but an organized campaign; and judging by the content of the materials, these press organs have come to serve as a mouthpiece for the right-wing, anti-socialist forces. We in the Politburo exchanged views about this matter and unanimously concluded that there is every basis for regarding the unfolding situation as a violation of the agreement reached in Čierna nad Tisou. I have in mind the agreement you and I reached during our one-on-one discussions, as well as the agreement we thrashed out during the four-on-four meetings and the agreement that emerged between the Politburo of our party and the Presidium of the Central Committee of your party.

DUBČEK. I already told you what sorts of measures we are taking to put an end to the anti-Soviet and anti-socialist manifestations in the mass media. I already told you what sorts of measures we are preparing and in what sequence we will carry them out. But I also told you at the time that it's impossible to do all this in a single day. We need time to take care of it. We're not able to restore order in the operations of the mass media in just two to three days.

BREZHNEV. Sasha, that's true, and we warned you at the time that the rightist forces will not easily give up their positions and that it would of course be impossible to do everything in just two to three days. But a lot more time than two to three days has already passed, and the success of your work in this regard depends on your willingness to take decisive measures to restore order in the mass media. Of course if the CPCz leadership and the CSSR government continue to pursue a policy of non-interference in this matter in the future, these processes will continue unabated. It's simply impossible to halt them through a policy of non-interference. You must resort to concrete measures. This is precisely the point on which we reached concrete agreement in connection with the role of Pelikán, and we said that it was essential to dismiss Pelikán. This would be the first step needed to restore order in the mass media.

DUBČEK. Leonid Ilyich, we studied these questions and are continuing to study them. I told Cde. Černík what sorts of measures we'd have to take, and I gave Cde. Lenárt the task of carrying out the necessary measures⁴. As far as I know, no sorts of attacks have been appearing recently against the CPSU or the Soviet Union or against the socialist order.

BREZHNEV. How can you say such a thing when literally all the newspapers-Literární listy, Mlada fronta, Reporter, Prace--every day are publishing anti-Soviet and anti-party articles?

DUBČEK. That was going on before Bratislava. Since Bratislava that hasn't been happening.

BREZHNEV. What do you mean it was only "before Bratislava"? On 8 August Literární listy featured an article entitled "From Warsaw to Bratislava,"

which was a full-blown, vicious attack against the CPSU and the USSR and against all the fraternal socialist countries⁵. The 8th of August, needless to say, was after Bratislava.

DUBČEK. That's an isolated case. I don't know of any others. All the rest appeared before Bratislava. We're opposed to this article and are now taking appropriate measures.

BREZHNEV. Sasha, I can't agree with this. Over the past two to three days, the newspapers I mentioned have been doggedly continuing to occupy themselves with the publication of defamatory ravings about the Soviet Union and the other fraternal countries. My comrades on the Politburo insist that we make an urgent approach to you on this matter and that we send you a diplomatic note to this effect, and I'm not able to restrain the comrades from sending such a note⁶. But I only wanted to make sure that before a note is sent to you about this matter, I got a chance to speak with you personally.

DUBČEK. We had a meeting with members of the press. The session condemned the reporters at the newspapers you were speaking about for their incorrect actions; and a decision was reached there to put an end to all polemical expressions.

BREZHNEV. Sasha, that's not the point--whether you had a meeting with members of the press or not. What we agreed about was not just to hold some meeting. We agreed that all the mass media--the press, the radio, and the television--would be brought under the control of the CPCz Central Committee and the government, and that you would put an end to anti-Soviet and anti-socialist publications after Bratislava. For our part, we in the Soviet Union are strictly abiding by this agreement and are not engaging in any sorts of polemics⁷. As far as the Czechoslovak organs of mass media are concerned, they're keeping up their relentless attacks against the CPSU and the Soviet Union and have even reached the point where they've been attacking the leaders of our Party. They've already been branding us as "Stalinists" and other such things. And what, I might ask, do you say about this?

DUBČEK. [Falls silent]⁸

BREZHNEV. I think I'm correct in telling you that so far we haven't witnessed any actions on the part of the CPCz CC Presidium that would fulfill the obligations taken on in this sphere. I must candidly say to you, Sasha, that by dragging your feet in the fulfillment of these obligations, you're committing outright deceit and are blatantly sabotaging the decisions we jointly reached. This posture toward the obligations you undertook is creating a new situation and is prompting us to reevaluate your statement. For this same reason we are considering new, independent decisions that would defend both the CPCz and the cause of socialism in Czechoslovakia.

DUBČEK. I only want to say to you, Cde. Brezhnev, that we are working in this direction. If you were able to be here among us, you'd see what great efforts we're expending in this direction. But this is a difficult matter and we're not able to resolve it in just two to three days, as I already told you. We need time for this.

BREZHNEV. Aleksandr Stepanovich, I'm also obliged to say that we're not able to wait much longer and that you shouldn't force us to open new polemics with

your mass media and to respond to all the articles and activities that are being permitted now in Czechoslovakia against our country, against our party, and against all the socialist parties.

During the negotiations we didn't force you to agree to anything. You yourselves took on the obligation to restore order in the mass media. And once you promised it, you should have been willing to carry it out. Well, fine, I perhaps can even agree with you that the restoration of order in this sphere requires time. But how are you coming along in carrying out the agreement on personnel questions? One must say that on this matter, too, we had a fully concrete agreement, and we also settled on a fully concrete timeframe for carrying it out.

DUBČEK. I would only like to say to you, Cde. Brezhnev, that these are very complex matters, which can't be resolved as easily as you might think.

BREZHNEV. I understand how complicated these matters are. I'm only asking you to resolve them along the lines we agreed on at Čierna nad Tisou. Was it not already clear to you and Černík and Smrkovský and Svoboda, when we met in our four-on-four sessions, how complex it would be to resolve these matters? Yet at the time you yourselves very easily and very independently, without any sort of coercion from us, raised these matters and promised to resolve them as soon as possible.

DUBČEK. I already told you, Cde. Brezhnev, that this is a complex question, the resolution of which requires that we convene a plenum. And in order to examine and resolve these questions, there must be due preparation. I must consult with the comrades about how best to resolve this question.

BREZHNEV. But back in Čierna nad Tisou all your comrades were present, and I don't think you took on all these obligations then without having consulted among yourselves. We adopted the obligations, shook hands, and said that the question was decided and that you would take care of it as soon as possible.

DUBČEK. I didn't promise to resolve this matter in two to three days. We need ample preparation in order to resolve the question properly.

BREZHNEV. But it's impossible to keep on resolving these questions ad infinitum, Sasha. When you were preparing for the last Presidium meeting, you and I had a conversation. In particular, a conversation about personnel matters. I'm referring to my conversation with you on 9 August⁹. At that time you said to me that you weren't yet ready to handle things at that Presidium meeting, but that you would definitely prepare these matters and resolve them at the next Presidium meeting. And now you say that you have a Presidium meeting under way. So, will you be considering these matters today at this Presidium meeting, or will you not?

DUBČEK. These matters can be taken up only by a plenum of the Central Committee.

BREZHNEV. Fine. You also told me that you were preparing to convene a plenum within the next ten days.

DUBČEK. Yes, we're thinking about holding a plenum by the end of the month. But it may be that it won't occur until the beginning of September.

BREZHNEV. But will you be considering personnel questions at this plenum?

Will you resolve them positively, as we agreed at Čierna nad Tisou?

DUBČEK. [Gives an evasive answer to this question, in the sense that what happens will be whatever the plenum decides¹⁰.]

BREZHNEV. This is where the problem lies. Both our problem and your problem. I'll tell you honestly that when you and I were speaking in Čierna nad Tisou, I thought that I was dealing with the leader of the chief party organ, the organ that has complete power. And everything that you promised us we accepted in good faith; and like friends, we believed you in all you said. Personally, Sasha, I can't understand at all why and to what end you've deferred the resolution of these matters until a new plenum, that is, an extraordinary plenum. We believe that today, at this Presidium meeting, you could resolve personnel questions; and believe me, you could resolve them without any great loss. If you place these matters before the Presidium today, it would still be possible--this would be the last chance--to salvage matters without great detriment or great loss. It will be worse if these losses are very large.

DUBČEK. [Again insists that these matters can be resolved only by a plenum¹¹.]

BREZHNEV. If I understand you correctly, you don't intend to consider these matters today. I want to ask you directly, Sasha, what you mean by this, and what I'm getting at here is that you're deceiving us! I'm not able to regard it as anything other than deceit.

DUBČEK. Leonid Ilyich, if you could see how these matters are being prepared now in the Presidium, you wouldn't talk this way. We promised to resolve these matters, and we are taking all the measures needed to resolve them correctly.

BREZHNEV. Sasha, I'm not just speaking here personally for myself. The entire Politburo has instructed me to speak with you¹² and to ask you concretely: Will you be resolving the personnel questions or not?

DUBČEK. [Evades a direct answer, explaining that it is impossible to resolve all the personnel questions at once, that these questions are very complex and imposing, and that, as he already said, these questions must be considered by a plenum¹³.]

BREZHNEV. My comrades are interested in finding out, and I would ask you to let me know so that I can transmit your answer to the members of our Politburo, what sorts of questions you are thinking of considering today at the CC Presidium meeting?

DUBČEK. [Enumerates the questions and says that among them the bifurcation of the Interior Ministry will be considered, as was agreed at Čierna nad Tisou¹⁴.]

BREZHNEV. And how is this question to be resolved? Will it be as we decided? I want to remind you, as you no doubt remember, that when this question was put to you, you turned to Èerník. Èerník said to you that the question had already been decided and that a candidate for the second post had already been designated, and within five days they would transmit orders about this to Smrkovský. You then turned to Smrkovský,¹⁵ and he said that as soon as Èerník issued this document, your Council would resolve the matter within five days.

DUBČEK. Yes, he said that back in Čierna, but now the situation has fundamentally changed. We now have a process of federalization under way. There will be a federation of Slovakia with the Czech lands. And this question simply cannot be decided now by a central order for the country as a whole until Slovakia and the Czech Republic separately have adopted the corresponding decisions. For that reason, we at today's Presidium meeting are able to resolve this question only as an instruction to the government and minister to prepare the requisite ideas for the final resolution of this matter somewhat later.

BREZHNEV. How much later?

DUBČEK. In the month of October, toward the end of October.

BREZHNEV. Well, what can I say to you about this, Sasha, except that it seems to be yet another manifestation of deceit. This is just one more sign that you're deceiving us, and I can't regard it as anything other than that, let me say to you in all honesty. If you're not even able to resolve this matter now, then it seems to me that your Presidium in general has lost all its power.

DUBČEK. I don't see any deceit in this. We're trying to carry out the obligations we undertook. But we're carrying them out as best we can in a fundamentally changing situation.

BREZHNEV. But surely you understand that this arrangement, this way of fulfilling the obligations undertaken at Čierna nad Tisou, will create a completely new situation which we, too, hadn't reckoned with, and that this obviously will compel us to reevaluate the whole situation and resort to new, independent measures.

DUBČEK. Cde. Brezhnev, you should resort to all the measures that your CC Politburo believes are appropriate.

BREZHNEV. But if that's how you're going to answer me, I must say to you, Sasha, that this is a flippant statement.

DUBČEK. I'm not able to answer in any other way. We're working very hard to carry out the agreement. But in these conditions over the last week to ten days we haven't yet fully coped with it. We're not able to do more than what we've been doing. This is a large matter to deal with, and we're not able to complete all our work in just 10-15 days. How could it all be done in such a short time? I'm not able to take responsibility upon myself for doing everything in just five to seven days; this is a complex process, which has encompassed the whole party, the whole country, and the whole nation. And the party must keep control of this process, bringing the nation along with it in the construction of socialism. In this we see our duty, and in this we see our obligation, but it's impossible to do this in as short a time as you are suggesting, Cde. Brezhnev. With full responsibility I am telling you that if you don't believe me, if you believe we are deceiving you, then you should take the measures that your Politburo believes are necessary.

BREZHNEV. Sasha, I understand that you're nervous, I understand that this situation is very complex for you. But don't you see that I'm talking with you as a friend, and that I wish only the best for you? If you recall the conversation you and I had one-on-one, as well as the conversation during our four-on-four sessions, and when you proposed your measures for restoring order in the mass media, it was we, not you, who pointed out that this would not be an easy task and

that it would take time to bring the mass media back under control because the rightists had planted their agents everywhere, literally everywhere. In all the outlets of the mass media and information organs the rightists are firmly implanted, and the whole arrangement is being masterminded by Pelikán, Císař, Kriegel, and other scoundrels. But you at that time, in Čierna nad Tisou, said you could handle this work and that you didn't need any sort of help from us. We firmly agreed then that after Bratislava we would put an end to all polemics. I can understand that you're having difficulty, but the one thing I don't understand is why you've done nothing to overcome these difficulties. For example, let's turn back to the personnel questions. Again one can say that during the Čierna talks you also, without any pressure from us and completely of your own free will, said to us that you would be resolving all these questions literally as soon as possible.

DUBČEK. I can't just resolve these matters myself. It's not so simple, Cde. Brezhnev, to resolve such matters.

BREZHNEV. Well, how simple it was back in Čierna nad Tisou to have a conversation, and are you now really implying that those were just irresponsible conversations at the level of the two highest organs of the leadership of the party? If it's clear that some question or other is difficult to resolve, then we shouldn't have had completely irresponsible discussions about it. That's how I understand this matter. It's impossible to overstate, Sasha, how irritated I am by what you're doing now. You and I spoke about very important and very far-reaching matters, which will decide the fate not only of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, but also of the whole socialist camp. I'm not demanding anything new, and I haven't raised a single new issue for you. I only want to get from you a firm indication of when you're thinking of fulfilling the obligations about which we agreed at the meeting in Čierna nad Tisou. You have to understand that this isn't the way things are done--to have two fraternal parties meet and adopt a decision, and then just 10 days later have one side change its tune.

DUBČEK. We aren't changing our tune, it's just that the situation is complex and it requires a prolonged amount of time to carry out the agreement that was adopted.

BREZHNEV. Well, fine, Sasha, then permit me to ask you openly and directly one additional question. Do you personally support the notion of fulfilling the obligations which you undertook at Čierna nad Tisou, or not?

DUBČEK. There will be a plenum, Leonid Ilyich, the plenum will decide everything.

BREZHNEV. When will the plenum be?

DUBČEK. This question, I believe, will be resolved by us today in the Presidium meeting. I think we'll convene a plenum before the end of the month. But I can't give you a precise date because if I don't get it right and the Presidium schedules the plenum at a time different from the one I tell you, you'll again accuse me of having given you an insincere answer. This is difficult for me, Cde. Brezhnev, I still have a Party Congress ahead and I am completely unprepared for this Congress.

BREZHNEV. That's an entirely different matter. But by the way, since you've raised it, let me convey to you my personal view on this matter. I have participated in many congresses, and I've already conducted one congress

independently as the first secretary of our party. I personally can't imagine how it is possible to prepare a congress in such a short time. After all, the congress resolves weighty questions in the life of the party, and you must seriously prepare for such things, without any slip-ups. I'm surprised that you would even think a congress could be prepared in such a short time. But this, as they say, is your own affair. I've digressed from our conversation.

DUBČEK. Yes. That's right, but since we have to deal with the situation as it exists, we are working night and day to prepare for the Congress. We have an Action Program, draft party statutes, and personnel questions. In general, I think, we will succeed in preparing for the Congress.

BREZHNEV. Let's return to the thrust of our conversation. I don't know whether you'll be able to let your comrades on the Presidium know about our conversation and tell them about the anxiety I've expressed to you at the way the situation is unfolding.

DUBČEK. I absolutely, without delay, will tell Cdes. Èerník and Smrkovský about this.

BREZHNEV. Yes, that's good, you should tell Èerník and Smrkovský, but I think, Sasha, that the other comrades are also full-fledged members of the Presidium, and that you're obliged to say something to them about my phone call. I must tell you, Sasha, that they are very fond of you and can help you a great deal. I can assure you that these are your real friends both in their past work--before the January plenum--and in carrying out the January plenum, and if you'd really like to know, I think they can help you more than Èerník and Smrkovský can.

DUBČEK. Right now we already have a different agenda for the Presidium meeting, but I'll try to find the opportunity to tell all the comrades about this conversation.

BREZHNEV. Sasha, if I've understood you correctly, you're saying that at today's Presidium meeting you won't be considering a single one of the questions we agreed on at Čierna nad Tisou.

DUBČEK. Only the question of the Interior Ministry.

BREZHNEV. But as I understood you, you won't be deciding even this question the way we agreed--or at least not completely the way we agreed--in Čierna nad Tisou.

DUBČEK. [Very irritably repeats everything he said earlier about the difficulties attending the resolution of such matters.]

BREZHNEV. Aleksandr Stepanovich, I regret that you're talking with me in such an irritable manner. On such momentous issues, emotions won't do anyone any good. What is needed here are common sense, reason, and will. Emotions here are of no help at all.

DUBČEK. I would be content to toss everything aside and go back to working at my old place. Why am I irritated? Because we're taking action here, we're working, we're doing everything we can to fulfill the agreement reached at Čierna nad Tisou, and yet the whole time you're accusing us. This is already the second conversation in which you've accused me of doing nothing, of deceiving you, and

of not wanting to resolve the matters on which we agreed.

BREZHNEV. Sasha, I'd like to believe you, but you must understand me. What troubles me most of all is that you haven't dismissed the three whom we agreed to dismiss, and this leaves a very big question. If you're sincerely convinced that you must release Císař, Kriegel, and Pelikán, and that this must be done, then I'm deeply convinced that a sincere effort on your part would allow you to do this very easily and simply.

DUBČEK. What reasons do you have for suggesting that this can be done quickly?

BREZHNEV. We explained these things to you in Čierna nad Tisou. I'm not even referring here to the things that were not in the protocol--that is, the things we discussed in our one-on-one or four-on-four meetings. What I'm referring to are what was discussed in our plenary sessions, when we were all together. Go take a look at the stenographic report of my speech at the plenary session. You'll find there all our views. We directly told Kriegel that he is who he is. We openly said this at the plenary session. What further basis can you possibly want, Sasha? Fine, you say that you're not able to resolve these questions in the Presidium, and that it's necessary to convene a regular plenum. But from your answers, if you'll forgive me, I didn't understand whether even at the plenum you'll actually resolve these matters or not.

DUBČEK. At the regular plenum another CPCz CC First Secretary will be chosen.

BREZHNEV. Sasha, don't go to such extremes, this sort of talk is completely unnecessary. I don't know what would prompt you to speak with me this way; perhaps you feel uncomfortable about speaking with me more openly, or perhaps someone there is acting as a constraint on you. Well, then, let's agree that after the Presidium meeting, Cde. Chervonenko will come to your office and you can tell him in greater detail when and how you are thinking about resolving the matters on which we agreed at the Čierna meeting.

DUBČEK. I can say nothing more. I already said everything there is to say, Cde. Brezhnev, and I can say nothing more to Cde. Chervonenko.

BREZHNEV. Then let me ask you to tell me whether you'll be resolving these matters at the plenum or not.

DUBČEK. And who said that I won't?

BREZHNEV. Again you're evading a direct response. You don't want to say whether you will or you won't.

DUBČEK. The last time I told you everything, and now I'm only able to repeat what I said earlier: that we're going to convene a plenum, that we must prepare for the plenum, and that we need time for this. If you believe that we're deceiving you, then take the measures you regard as appropriate. That's your affair.

BREZHNEV. Don't you see, Sasha, that we undoubtedly will be adopting the measures we believe are appropriate? You're absolutely correct in saying that this is our affair. But as far as this affair is not only ours but a matter of common concern, the measures would be easier for us to adopt if you and your comrades

would more openly say that these are the measures you are expecting of us.

DUBČEK. We're able to resolve all these matters on our own, but if you believe it's necessary for you to adopt certain measures, then by all means go ahead.

BREZHNEV. I'm not asking you why you didn't resolve any particular matter or another. I'm asking you something else, Sasha: namely, when you plan to resolve the things we agreed on.

DUBČEK. You're not asking me, you're rebuking me.

BREZHNEV. I'm not rebuking you; I'm simply saying that in the wake of our meetings nothing has changed, and that we don't detect any sort of concrete actions aimed at fulfilling the agreement that exists between us. And insofar as that is the case, we are naturally alarmed. It seems to us that you're simply deceiving us and are completely unwilling to fulfill what we agreed on so firmly when we looked one another in the eye, as well as during our four-on-four meetings. But if you're saying that at the regular plenum you'll resolve all the matters we agreed on at Čierna nad Tisou, then this of course will considerably alleviate our doubts. I'm not saying that our doubts will be eliminated altogether, but at least they'll be alleviated. After all, we're accustomed to believing you, and we see in you the leader of a fraternal party whom we can treat with great confidence.

DUBČEK. I'd just as soon go where it would be pleasant to work. I don't set great store by this post. Let whoever wants to occupy it, take it. Let whoever wants to be CPCz CC First Secretary, take up the post. I can't work without enjoying support and in a situation of constant attacks.

BREZHNEV. Sasha, I want to tell you openly that you yourself have created all the difficulties you're referring to. You saw how, before your very eyes, Čisaø and Kriegel installed their people in the press, radio, and television. These are people who have nothing in common with the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. You yourself have created the personnel problem. You yourself have created all the problems you were mentioning. We didn't create these problems for you. It's precisely because of you that everything has gotten out of hand, and that you've lost power. And yet now you're bemoaning it. And I very much regret that you regard our conversation as an attack against you rather than a gesture of support. For it is precisely as a gesture of support that you should regard everything I've been talking about with you now. This hasn't been an attack against you.

DUBČEK. Leonid Ilyich, I ask you to tell me how this can be.

BREZHNEV. It's hard for me to give you any suggestions. But I want to tell you that if you continue to operate alone and if you continue to fluctuate between the leftists and rightists, you won't end up doing anything. Without the party *aktiv* you won't do anything. All around you are so many of your close comrades; they're good people and good Communists. If you seek out the support of the party *aktiv* and rally them around you, there will no longer be any Čisaš and Kriegels. In Čierna nad Tisou we were not inhibited about saying everything directly to Kriegel's face, without holding back. And yet you for some reason are still coddling him and kissing up to him.

You, Sasha, should take a close look around. I don't want to name names for you, but you know the people it would be worthwhile for you to rely on. By relying on

them, you could resolve all your problems. I again say to you that by telling you this, by having this conversation, I am simply doing all I can to help you.

Right now we all are living: our party as well as the other fraternal parties from the Bratislava meeting and the documents of the Bratislava conference. I'm conveying all our doubts to you as frankly and openly and directly as I can. Let's just fulfill what we agreed on, and not an ounce more. As for your question of what will become of you, I can't give you an answer. If you want us to avoid a falling-out, let's just fulfill what we agreed on. Let's give an appropriate Communist rebuff to the rightist forces. You'll have to strike a blow against them before the Congress. It will have to be a blow from which they won't recover. Only in that case will the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia be able to show its best face at the Congress.

DUBČEK. And I suppose you think that I don't want this.

BREZHNEV. No, I don't think so. I believe you, Sasha. I believe that everything we wish for you is for the best, and that you will perceive as your duty what you will, while we for our part are ready to give you any help you need. But I ask you to understand that if you don't fulfill everything we agreed on--and I emphasize once again that these were things we agreed on; I'm not raising any new issues of any sort--then that will be an end to our trust in you. The whole point of our meeting in Čierna nad Tisou was to maintain the greatest trust in one another. All of our decisions were adopted in a spirit of enormous trust, and this is precisely what obliges us, in the most conscientious manner, to fulfill everything we agreed on. For a very long time you've been speaking in detail about the difficulties you've encountered while trying to carry out the decisions achieved between us and the agreement we arrived at. But I want to tell you that any question can always be made more complicated than it should be.

DUBČEK. We're not complicating anything; we're simply trying to deal with the situation that actually exists in our country.

BREZHNEV. Why do you say this? Take this simple matter of dividing the Interior Ministry. Just as we agreed and as you yourselves said, this is a simple matter, one that you could resolve within the next five to ten days. And yet what has happened? You've done nothing.

DUBČEK. That's because the situation has changed. I told you that neither Èerník nor I had foreseen that the situation would change. But our underlying view that such a step should be taken has not changed. We still firmly adhere to the view that this step should be taken. Only the situation has changed. But this means that the whole question must be approached differently. The outcome no longer depends on us alone.

BREZHNEV. Sasha, let me ask you a question: What, if anything, does depend on your CC Presidium?

DUBČEK. Cde. Brezhnev, I once again ask you not to insist that I carry out this decision, considering that the situation has changed.

BREZHNEV. Indeed I'm not insisting on it. I'm just saying that you on the CC Presidium are not in control of anything, and that it's a great pity we weren't aware of that during the meeting in Čierna nad Tisou. It now turns out that we were discussing things with an organ that is not in control of anything. It turns out that

our conversation wasn't serious at all.

DUBČEK. The reasons for holding up the resolution of the matter are simply that Slovakia is now a federative territory while the ministry is a union-republic organ, and it's now necessary to follow a whole series of procedures if we are to settle this question once and for all.

BREZHNEV. I believe you, but you must also understand me. I'm not able to decide new matters behind the backs of the other members of my Politburo. I'm not able to give consent to any of your arguments. From what you've said it turns out that new circumstances have arisen for you, and so it's now totally unclear whether or when you'll be fulfilling our agreement about the division of the Interior Ministry. Doesn't it follow, then, that we have to reassess our whole agreement? You're aware that we agreed to these things at the very highest level. You and I spoke one on one. This is a high level. We also spoke in four-on-four sessions. This was at the level of first secretaries, the level of chairmen of Councils of Ministers, and the level of chairmen of Supreme Soviets (or, as you have, a National Assembly). That is, our talks involved people who should be able to decide any matter. And it now turns out that these people can't decide anything. And now you're saying to me: "Take whatever measures the CPSU CC Politburo believes are necessary." Of course, one must obviously agree with you that we'll have to take whatever measures we believe are necessary. And by the way, I wanted to ask you something about the decisions we adopted during the four-on-four sessions. Did you convey the results to Cde. Bil'ak and the other comrades who are close to you?

DUBČEK. Yes, I informed Cde. Bil'ak about the things we decided during the four-on-four meetings.

BREZHNEV. It's good that you did so, Sasha. These are your most dependable and closest friends. I would only urge you to rely on them. By relying on them, you can emerge triumphant. And you won't even need to wait for a plenum; with their help, you'll be able to resolve all these matters within the Presidium.

DUBČEK. Please wait, nonetheless, Leonid Ilyich, until the plenum.

BREZHNEV. Well, if this plenum is held soon, then of course I'll wait, and we all will wait.

DUBČEK. Leonid Ilyich, I well understand your benevolent intentions, and I only ask that you take into account the difficulties we are facing.

BREZHNEV. I very clearly see your difficulties, Sasha, but you must put up a struggle against these difficulties. The struggle against them will be successful only under one condition, namely, that you yourself take direct charge of this struggle. You must surround yourself with reliable members of the party aktiv, and by depending on these comrades, you'll be able to overcome your difficulties.

DUBČEK. I'm running out of steam; it wasn't by chance that I told you that the new plenum would choose a new secretary. I'm thinking of giving up this work. Dear Leonid Ilyich, I ask that you forgive me for perhaps having spoken somewhat irritably today, I very much hope that you'll forgive me.

BREZHNEV. I understand, Sasha, it's your problems and your nerves. I want you to understand that in the context of what we agreed on at Čierna nad Tisou, you

have to adopt measures and fulfill your obligations.

DUBČEK. Our desire is no less than yours, Cde. Brezhnev, to have these matters successfully resolved.

BREZHNEV. Sasha, I take heart at your statement because the whole point of our conversation has been to help you fulfill these obligations. But you must also understand what it's like for us; for us, too, things aren't so easy. We reported back on that agreement to the plenum and to the Central Committee, and now we find it isn't being fulfilled. And so the party is asking us, as the leaders, why this is so. I want you to understand that good relations between our parties can be preserved only on the condition that there is mutual, honest fulfillment of the obligations by both sides. I think that you have no complaints about our party and our Politburo with regard to our fulfillment of the agreement achieved in Čierna nad Tisou.

DUBČEK. Leonid Ilyich, once again I affirm that we are not refusing to fulfill the agreement we reached in Čierna nad Tisou. The whole question is how much time we will be given to fulfill it, since there was no concrete timeframe specified in the agreement, and we still need more time to fulfill everything.

BREZHNEV. You shouldn't pose the question that way, since on every issue a concrete timeframe was stipulated. If we said that this was all to be decided as soon as possible and before the Congress, this establishes a well-defined deadline. That's not to imply it all had to be done in two to three days, but if we say "before the Congress," then it's clear that everything should be resolved, say, in August.

DUBČEK. I promise you, Cde. Brezhnev, that I'll do everything necessary to fulfill our agreement.

BREZHNEV. Good, we'll closely follow the course of events. I again earnestly request that you pass on my regards to all your working comrades and that you tell them about the alarm I've expressed to you. And now, Sasha, I would like to reach agreement with you on the desirability of continuing our conversations. If you don't want to meet with Cde. Chervonenko, then let's agree that we'll continue our conversation after you're done with the CC Presidium meeting. I understand that it's awkward to have all your comrades sitting there while you've gone off to have a conversation with me.

DUBČEK. I agree. So let's definitely say that we'll speak again after the Presidium meeting.

¹Some Russian (and other) historians have looked at these remarks and concluded that Brezhnev may have construed them as a tacit green light for Soviet intervention. Others disagree, however, and it remains a matter of ongoing debate.

²This transcript was declassified and released from the Russian Presidential Archives in April 1994 in connection with an international conference on the 1968 crisis held in Prague. It is one of nine documents presented at that time by the head of the Russian Archival Service, Rudol'f Pikhoya, to Czech President Vaclav Havel. At times the transcriber of the tapes has editorially summarized Dubcek's remarks rather than simply record them. Those places are marked with brackets.

³ Dubček is referring here to the telephone conversation of August 9th. See Document No. 77.

⁴In this connection, see Dubček's handwritten comments on the letter he received from Brezhnev on August 16th (Document No. 85).

⁵ Brezhnev again demonstrates the extent of the information flowing into the Kremlin about the situation in Czechoslovakia from a variety of sources: the Soviet embassy in Prague, KGB agents, and the "healthy forces" on the CPCz, most notably Bil'ak, with whom Brezhnev spoke by telephone on August 10th.

⁶An initial "letter of warning" was sent to Dubček by the CPSU Politburo that same day; see Document No. 89.

⁷Brezhnev is only partly correct; by August 13, polemics had started to reappear in the Soviet press.

⁸This is one of several places in the transcript where the transcriber inserted a brief comment to sum up Dubček's response, rather than providing a verbatim record. In this case the third-person verb "molchit", meaning "is silent," indicates a lack of response.

⁹ See Document No. 77.

¹⁰This is another instance in which the transcriber inserted a third-person phrase to sum up Dubček's response.

¹¹This summary comment was inserted by the transcriber.

¹²Since the Soviet leader and a number of top advisers were on vacation in the Crimea at this time, it would have been impossible for the "entire Politburo" to have been meeting or "exchanging views," unless some of the members were participating by phone (either during the session or by being consulted afterwards). A more likely scenario is that a core of senior members of the Politburo--Brezhnev, Podgornyi, Kosygin, and perhaps one or two others-- were meeting in the Crimea on behalf of the "entire Politburo." They probably received authority to do so at the session of the full CPSU Politburo on August 6th.

¹³ Here again the transcriber inserts a third-person comment to summarize Dubček's response.

¹⁴ This again is a summary of Dubček's response.

¹⁵ Soviet officials expected that the "candidate for the second post"--that is, the new head of Czechoslovakia's State Security forces, which were to be separated from the rest of the Interior Ministry--would be Viliam Salgovič, a notorious collaborator with the KGB.
