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Soviet Union: The Central Committee Plenum, 5-7 February

The plenum's draft Party platform will be published only tomorrow. And to complete the agenda of Party reform a second plenum, at the end of this month, will be necessary. (It is to agree new draft Party rules. This will involve sharp debate on internal Party issues such as the rules for internal Party elections, the acceptability of factions within the Party, relations between the centre and the republican parties, and restructuring of the Party's top bodies.)

2. We therefore cannot yet be sure what exactly Gorbachev has got the Party to agree. Nonetheless, it is already clear that the plenum has been a signal victory for him and his approach. The draft of the Party's platform was very much his and its general thrust appears to have emerged intact, despite the bitter debate at the plenum. None in the Central Committee, except Yeltsin, in the end voted against.

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3. The plenum was not the decisive break with the conservatives that we had half expected (my minute of 31 January). Gorbachev is clearly increasingly concerned about the preservation of Party unity - not just of the centre with its republican branches of the Party, but of the centre itself. The Party for the present remains his main power base and a split within it would be very damaging, presenting him with some difficult choices. He has therefore tried hard to keep the conservatives on



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board, while doing enough to avoid the Party's radical wing going ahead with its threatened formation of a new, social democratic style party.

4. For this reason, Gorbachev's draft programme seems to have been a skilful tactical compromise. His proposal for a sharp cut in the size of the Central Committee and a dramatic change in its role appears to have been dropped. Nor has there been the wholesale clear-out of Party conservatives demanded by the radicals and some Party grass roots opinion. Change is not to happen all at once: multi-party democracy will happen "at some stage"; the Party reforms have to be ratified at the Party's Congress this summer.

5. But the strategic victory is nonetheless Gorbachev's. Even if implementation is gradual, he has won on the key issues. The Party has renounced its constitutional monopoly on power. It has accepted that it should withdraw from day-to-day government. Multi-party democracy is to be allowed. These developments are now a matter for legislation in the Supreme Soviet (whose third session begins next week) and ratification by the Congress of People's Deputies (whose next session will probably begin in May). Moreover, on internal Party matters, even in advance of the plenum at the end of this month, the Party has accepted a radical degree of autonomy for its republican branches; a complete revamping of the Politburo and Central Committee Secretariat; and the prospect of sweeping personnel changes at the Party Congress, if not sooner.

6. Gorbachev has also secured agreement to the creation of an executive presidency, to boost his at present limited powers as Chairman of the Supreme Soviet. This will help to ensure effective decision making now that the Politburo is to be doubled in size and filled with *ex-officio* members. But it should also give Gorbachev the power to




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push through reform (particularly economic) with somewhat less need for compromise. And, above all, it will create for him by the summer a new, separate power base, helping to insulate his personal position should the Party collapse.

7. Now that they have conceded these principles, the Party conservatives are on a slippery slope. The Party platform is still only a draft. Internal party debate before and at the Congress will amend it further, and pressure from the Party's grass roots is currently all in a radical direction. On those changes for which legislation is required (eg amendment of article 6, multi-party democracy, and an executive presidency) the country's parliamentary bodies can push matters further than the Party has so far agreed.

8. The plenum decisions are therefore a momentous breach in the Party dyke. Gorbachev hopes that his controlled reform will preserve a major political role for the Party. But, as in Bulgaria, the Party's concessions may only whet the public's appetite for more. We would expect to see the Party's entrenched cells in workplaces and in the armed forces coming increasingly into question. Radical political groups such as the Democratic Union are likely quickly to test the genuineness of the CPSU's new commitment to democracy by declaring themselves to be formal parties. And both grass roots Party members and the population at large, having smelt the blood of the Party apparatus, are likely to press hard for more rapid change. In the last two weeks we have already seen "people's power" remove local party leaderships in important towns and regions scattered right across the Soviet Union and the trend currently appears to be growing.

  
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9 February 1990