

DOCUMENT No. 77: Summary Report and Transcript of Telephone Conversation between Leonid Brezhnev and Alexander Dubček, August 9, 1968

Source: Sb. KV, Z/S 8; Vondrová & Navrátil, vol. 2, pp. 164–167.

This transcript records one of several important telephone conversations that Brezhnev had with Dubček in the two weeks following the Bratislava conference. Brezhnev repeatedly expresses his concern that the CPCz leader has yet to implement personnel changes, reorganizations and social crackdowns that the Czechoslovak authorities had supposedly agreed to at the Čierna nad Tisou and Bratislava meeting. Although Brezhnev makes no explicit or even implicit threats of military intervention in this discussion, he does stress Dubček's need "to understand certain increasing concerns here" and how "in my opinion this is very serious now."

(See also Document No. 81.)

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Cde. Brezhnev greets Cde. Dubček and inquires how things are going. A short conversation on general matters follows.

Then Cde. Brezhnev says that the Soviet party and people are concerned about a number of unpleasant matters appearing in the press and the remarks of Císař and others. One gains the impression that the proper conclusions have not been drawn from the meeting. Then Cde. Brezhnev goes on to say the following:

Brezhnev: . . . We understand perfectly well that it is the rightists who are doing such things, but communists and the people do not understand and have different attitudes toward the action of the leadership as a whole. It is becoming difficult to hold back the wave of protests and replies to all this. Besides, we are gaining the impression that the commitments we approved with you in Čierna nad Tisou are not being fulfilled, as well as those approved at the bilateral talks in the presence of the entire CPCz CC Presidium, and also the personnel questions agreed upon at the multilateral conference.¹⁵

In such circumstances, Alexander Stepanovich, I wanted to ask in what way we can help. . .

Dubček: I understand your concerns, Cde. Brezhnev. But at the moment I am not asking for any assistance.

Brezhnev: In analyzing what is happening in your country now and in view of all the information we have at our disposal, we have come to the conclusion that the rightists, and you know the people I'm referring to, once again are waging organized, subversive work against the decisions we adopted in Čierna nad Tisou.

Dubček: Yes, we also attribute everything negative in our activities to right-wing tendencies.

Brezhnev: In connection with this, Sasha, I would like to emphasize that we are now living through a very trying period. In many ways it will define our future links and relations. I always spoke the truth and was honest in keeping with circumstances and the situation. I have come to the conviction, the firm conviction, that you have the strength and people in the Presidium—these healthy forces—on whom you can rely and who will give you everything. The only serious

¹⁵ In the last few years of his life, Dubček denied that he had made any specific commitments on personnel changes at Čierna, but the issue is by no means clear-cut, especially in light of the speech Dubček gave at the September 1966 plenum of the CPCz CC. For further discussion of this matter, see Document No. 85.

matter is your decision, whether to rely on these forces, to bring them close to you and to lead them in the struggle against the Right. I am telling you this because during the days we met I saw your concern, and along with it I noticed your doubts and vacillations. Therefore I want to tell you once more, Sasha, that without determined people, without determined assistance, without people dedicated to our cause, you will not be able to cope with the Right. Everything now depends on victory over the Right. Either we strengthen what is sacred to us—friendship between the CPCz and the CPSU—or we return to the difficult problems and decisions we were encountering until the meetings in Čierna nad Tisou and the conference in Bratislava.

Dubček: Černík and Lenárt are working on measures to carry out the agreements reached in Čierna nad Tisou.

Brezhnev: Well, to be matter-of-fact, Sasha, when do you expect to take up the question of personnel in accordance with the agreement we reached?

Dubček: That's a very complicated question and you know we cannot solve it without a plenary session. We are thinking of calling a Central Committee plenum in the near future and will probably take up these questions there.¹⁶

Brezhnev: But has a date been set for the beginning of your plenum's work?

Dubček: No. On Tuesday we'll consider this question and make a decision about the date of the Central Committee plenum.¹⁷ But I think we'll convene the plenum in about ten days.¹⁸

Brezhnev: And then, at the plenum, you expect to take up the question of personnel?

Dubček: Yes, that's a question for the plenum. We can't decide it until the plenum meets.

Brezhnev: And the question of dividing the Ministry of the Interior. Evidently for that, it is not necessary to call a plenum. You remember then, at the meeting, that Cde. Černík, Cde. Smrkovský, and you said that this question can be resolved literally in a matter of several days, and your suggestion of candidates for the second post was a good one—Šalgovič.¹⁹ All the same, how do you expect to solve this question, when do you expect to solve it?

Dubček: Our comrades are now considering this question but, of course, it also cannot be solved in a matter of two or three days.

Brezhnev: But Cde. Černík said very specifically at the meeting that in the course of five days he would be able to give Smrkovský a document. Smrkovský said that as soon as he received the document from Černík, the National Assembly would act favorably within five days on this question, and I think that the agreement was absolutely concrete and clear. I don't understand what new questions have arisen on this score.

Dubček: Purely organizational matters involving the structure of the ministry in connection with the division of Slovakia into a separate republic.²⁰

¹⁶ August 29, 1968, was eventually set for the plenum to which Dubček refers here, according to his speech at the September 1969 plenum of the CPCz CC (ÚSD, AÚV KSČ, F. 01, Sv. 210, A.j. 131). Presumably, that date was arranged by the Presidium at its meeting on August 13, as Dubček promised Brezhnev during this conversation.

¹⁷ The CPCz Presidium normally met on Tuesdays. The Tuesday to which Dubček referred here was August 13.

¹⁸ The date was actually set for somewhat later—on August 29. The difference between this later date and a date that would have been “in about ten days” time” (i.e., by August 19) was crucial because the Slovak party congress was due to start on August 26. Soviet leaders wanted the crisis to be resolved before that congress convened.

¹⁹ The post in question was the head of the State Security (*Státní bezpečnost*, or StB) organs. Viliam Šalgovič was working for the Soviet KGB all through the crisis, and he supervised the StB's operations on behalf of the Soviet Union during and after the invasion.

²⁰ The proposed establishment of a federal Czechoslovak state in 1968, with separate Czech and Slovak republic-level governments alongside the federal organs, had created a good deal of uncertainty about the precise demarcation of functions and responsibilities.

Brezhnev: Alexander Stepanovich, I realize that you're very busy but I ask you personally to see how matters are going on these questions so that the comrades working on them don't draw out the decisions over a very long time.

Dubček: Yes, I'm busy with all this, I am personally following these matters.

Brezhnev: Sasha, I wanted to talk about another question. This concerns the witch-hunt against the workers of the Auto-Praha factory who signed the letter to *Pravda*.²¹ If you remember, before this letter was published the Soviet ambassador showed it to you, and you said it was a very good letter. Yes, and it was good. That letter contains absolutely nothing contrary to, say, the spirit of our declaration in Bratislava. And I can't understand at all why such a situation permitted where Císař organizes attacks on honest, good representatives of the working class from one of the best enterprises in your country.

Dubček: That is the doing of the right-wing which expected different results from our talk. This is an attack by the Right. We spoke to Černík yesterday, and we will consider this and the take steps so that it doesn't spread to other factories and so that the press stops making a fuss about it.

Brezhnev: Well, and how are things as regards fulfillment of the other conditions agreed upon and approved by us, together, in Čierna nad Tisou?

Dubček: Černík and Lenárt are working on measures to implement the agreement, measures to prohibit spontaneous meetings.

Brezhnev: These meetings, as far as I know, are no longer spontaneous. They are being instigated by Císař and other anti-party elements.

Dubček: I was told that Císař took part in them. If that is so, then it is the work of right-wing-oriented forces. But I ordered an analysis of this question and an investigation of Císař's actions.

Brezhnev: Of course, that's good, if investigations of the activities of Císař are regular an objective. But all this depends on who does the investigating, Sasha. I think you should rely on the healthy forces in the CPCz CC Presidium, on the comrades who were always close to you—close to you in your work in Slovakia and in your work in the CPCz CC Presidium. They'll fully support you in the fight against the Right if you, personally, accept their support. This is particularly serious now when the struggle with the Right has entered the most trying and decisive moment. In such conditions it is especially important to have united, collective action by the healthy forces and to be courageous. I think that you, yourself, understand this well.

Dubček: Yes, we take all decisions collectively and with the full approval of all members of the CC Presidium.

Brezhnev: In a word, Sasha, I wanted to remind you in this call about our agreements in Čierna nad Tisou and in Bratislava. I wanted you to understand certain increasing concerns here. These decisions are not being fulfilled and I wanted to request that you think about this and find the time and the means to carry out what was agreed upon. In my opinion, this is very serious now.

Dubček: We are working on these questions, Cde. Brezhnev.

Brezhnev: We wish you success, we wish you all the best, Sasha. Good-bye.

²¹ This refers to the 99 workers at the Czechoslovak Auto-Praha factory in Prague, who supposedly co-authored and signed a petition that appeared in the Soviet press on July 30, 1968.

²² This presumably is a reference to Bilák and perhaps to others who Brezhnev mistakenly thought were Slovaks.