

RUSS - BREZHNEV PERSONALLY INTERVENES IN USSR GOVERNMENT SESSION

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Leonid Brezhnev set a noteworthy precedent in the history of the USSR Council of Ministers by his personal intervention with what the official TASS report of June 1 described as a "major speech" at a recent session of the Council devoted to preparation of the next Five-Year-Plan (1971-1975). In his capacity as Secretary-General of the CPSU Central Committee Brezhnev is not a member of the Council of Ministers. Although the Council can permit any person to attend its sessions (according to J. Towster, Political Power in the USSR * 1917 - 1947, Oxford University Press, New York, 1955, p. 284), the top party leader had never before been reported to have attended a session of the USSR Council of Ministers, still less to have delivered a "major speech" at such a session, excluding of course those periods when the top party leader simultaneously headed the Government, as Khrushchev did after March 1958.

At the same session of the Council of Ministers, Kosygin reportedly delivered a report on "Questions of the Basic Directions of the Development of the USSR National Economy During 1971-1975." It may be noted as a curiosity that neither in the TASS report nor in the Radio Moscow report (broadcast at 21.30 Moscow Time, June 1) are Kosygin and Brezhnev identified by their official titles, but merely called "comrades," while the text of the announcement published in Pravda of June 2 identified only Brezhnev by his official title as Secretary-General of the CPSU/CC. It would have been normal practice, moreover, to report under whose chairmanship the session of the Council was held. This was presumably not done because it was considered to be below the Secretary-General's "dignity" to attend a session of the Government chaired by Kosygin (which might have been viewed as placing Brezhnev in an inferior protocol position vis-à-vis Kosygin). There is thus created an impression that the session was held under the de facto chairmanship of Brezhnev, an impression that is reinforced by the emphasis officially placed on the importance of Brezhnev's speech by qualifying it with the adjective "major" (bolshaya: literally "large").

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Brezhnev's personal intervention in an important session of the USSR Council of Ministers may be seen as the climax so far in his longstanding efforts to subordinate the Government to his own will and influence. Outwardly, at least, his present ascendancy over the Government may be compared with that achieved by Khrushchev in the short-lived period between February 1957 (when the ousted CPSU leader took the initiative for a far-reaching reform of the Government administration and economy) and his personal assumption of the chairmanship of the Council of Ministers in March 1958, after his irreparable, but not yet public break with Premier Bulganin, which probably occurred shortly before the June plenum of the CPSU Central Committee in 1957. Explicitly, the subordination of the Government to the top party leader had never been made so clear since the days of Molotov's tenure as Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars before World War II, when in his speech at the first session of the USSR Supreme Soviet (first convocation) he said that "in all important questions we, the Council of People's Commissars, will turn for advice and for directions to the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party and, first of all, to comrade Stalin" (Pravda, January 20, 1938). This public acknowledgement of Brezhnev's superior wisdom has not passed Kosygin's lips yet (not counting his quoting of a statement made by Brezhnev in his report to the 23rd CPSU Congress when speaking recently in Kursk [Radio Moscow, April 17, 1970] which may be viewed more as a sign of deference and respect than as an explicit acknowledgement of Brezhnev's wisdom). It seems doubtful that it ever will. (CD)

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