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Brezhnev successors vie for top

WASHINGTON (AP) — Soviet Pres. Leonid Brezhnev, 76 next month, is in such poor health he remains in office only as a symbol while potential successors set policies and jockey for power, according to U.S. intelligence estimates.

Brezhnev may go on for a number of years, but his abilities to manage the complexities of government are steadily eroding, in the view of American experts. However, they emphasize that the Soviet decision-making process is able to function through an informal power-sharing arrangement.

"I don't see any sign at all of paralysis," said one of these officials, who asked not to be quoted by name.

Three men near the top of the hierarchy have been identified by experts as possible successors to the ailing Brezhnev. They are Yuri Andropov, former head of the KGB, the secret police; Konstantin Chernenko, the failing leader's closest associate in recent years; and Victor Grishin, head of the Communist party in Moscow.

A fourth erstwhile contender, Andrei Kirilenko, 76, is himself in poor health and no longer considered in the running. Intelligence sources say Kirilenko will be dropped from the ruling Politburo when it meets Nov. 15 and also taken off top defense committees.

"Brezhnev keeps going up

and down, but each time he comes back he comes back at a lower level of energy," said one U.S. official who monitors Kremlin developments.

"He's able to cope, and it's clear that he may go on for a number of years still," the official said. "But his abilities to manage all the complexities of government are decreasing over time."

In a bleaker appraisal of Brezhnev's health, another official said "he's always been in bad shape. He doesn't chair committees anymore. He really isn't running the country. He's there as a symbol."

But he said the Kremlin decided it was preferable to keep Brezhnev in office than

have an open fight over succession.

The transition in power began with the death of Premier Alexei Kosygin two years ago and accelerated with Communist party theoretician Mikhail Suslov's death last January.

Andropov was brought into the inner circle to work alongside Chernenko, who remained Brezhnev's right-hand man. Without a formal agreement, but as Brezhnev's energies declined, they joined with Andrei Gromyko, the veteran foreign minister; Dmitri Ustinov, the defense minister; and Nikolai Tikhonov, the new premier, in operating the government.

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