Eastern Europe on Trial

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Mikhail Gorbachev's efforts to modernize and restructure the Soviet Union may be impeded by the East European client states it has dominated since the end of World War II. Moscow's six allies—East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary—are key members of its military alliance, the Warsaw Pact, and of its economic alliance, the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (or COMECON, which also includes Cuba, Mongolia, and Vietnam). The Soviet Union has long established functional and symbolic, bilateral and multilateral, and formal and informal means for their subordination. Now, in the era of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring)—at a time when the imperatives of Soviet systemic reform demand external quiescence and assistance—the very legacy of Soviet control may imperil this vital region. Eastern Europe is now on trial.

In the past, the communist countries of Eastern Europe have performed vital military, political, and economic services for the USSR. The region has been an insulating buffer between the Soviet homeland to the east and "hostile" NATO countries to the west. This buffer has enabled the Soviet Union to forward-base more than 30 combat divisions, various special operations forces, hundreds of high-performance combat aircraft, and advanced weapons, including nuclear missiles. In time of war, the Warsaw Pact member states' armed forces will be integrated into large Soviet maneuver commands. In political matters, East European ruling elites follow Moscow's lead and project images of collegiality and cooperation. Economic coordination has been the function of COMECON, which conducts joint planning according to a "socialist division of labor" and has devised energy and other programs to tie the ten national economies more closely together.

These means have been used by Moscow to implement its long-term "preferred vision" of a unified Eastern Europe confronting a fragmented Western Europe independent of the United States. To achieve

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unity in Eastern Europe, Leonid Brezhnev, in the name of socialist internationalism, tried to integrate the diverse populations and Soviet-installed governments into a more cohesive bloc.[1] Moscow's failure in this regard has become increasingly apparent. The national economies have stagnated, and the East European military contribution to the Warsaw Pact has become a diminishing asset.[2] While advanced Western economies are adapting to the post-industrial era, requisite transformations are not taking place in the Eastern European societies. According to Walter D. Connor, "State socialism is not even on the entry ramp to *this* road."[3]

The multiple problems facing Eastern European countries are not unique to each country, but are general throughout the region owing to deficiencies inherent in communist systems. Ruling elites do not share widespread support, and antipathy between governments and the masses is obvious. Given past failures to more fully integrate the region and synchronize its political and economic policies, Gorbachev has inherited an empire in crisis, where the minimum agenda of maintaining communist party rule is itself problematic. As the Soviet Union embarks on widespread change, the Soviet leadership must look with apprehension toward this region, caught between the West, with which it shares so much of Europe's rich cultural heritage, and the East, representing imposed rule and institutionalized backwardness.

Soviet policies toward reform and autonomy in Eastern Europe will serve as the bellwether of both Gorbachev's intentions and his success at reform. Progress in Eastern Europe can make this vital region the showpiece of socialism or can signal the early failure of the Gorbachev "preferred vision," which is being implemented to some extent throughout the communist world, including Cuba and Vietnam. Tension between conformity and diversity has always been strong in Eastern Europe. Khrushchev's acknowledgement in 1956 of "many roads to socialism" was clarified by Brezhnev's invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 when the promises of Prague Spring challenged Moscow's political limits. Centrifugal forces in the region have consistently worked to resist Moscow's larger aims.

Mikhail Gorbachev has hinted of greater Soviet flexibility toward East European allies. In a 4 November 1987 speech to foreign delegates

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attending ceremonies honoring the 70th anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution, he called for a "more sophisticated culture of mutual relations." Attacking the "arrogance of omniscience," he observed that "unity does not mean identity and uniformity," and that there is "no 'model' of socialism to be emulated by everyone."[4] It remains to be seen whether Eastern Europe's ruling elites, protective of their privileges and leading role, can rise to the challenges increased independence may herald.

Given the degree and diversity of strains which threaten the stability and future of this long-suffering region, how Gorbachev carries out this new, liberal-sounding policy will demonstrate Moscow's sincerity in helping Eastern Europe. Reforms in Eastern Europe will either bring about serious systemic change of a scale and scope unknown since World War II or will devolve instead to a thin veneer of cosmetic improvements laid upon existing patterns of authoritarian rule. Eastern Europe is indeed on trial, and many, both East and West, now await the verdict.

Regional Maladies

More than 40 years of Soviet rule have resulted in a host of problems which show little sign of mitigation. While there are significant differences on a country-by-country basis, many problems are common to the entire region and are growing worse. They include a decline in hard-currency earnings and economic growth, political dissension, popular lethargy, religious discord, social distress, environmental pollution, divisive nationalism, and military backwardness.

According to James Bovard, Eastern Europe is closer to economic collapse than is generally appreciated. It is a "museum of the early industrial age," with obsolete factories, declining exports, old technology, marginal solvency, and aging leaders wed to the past. In Bovard's words, the region is "rapidly becoming part of the third world—and many third world countries are surpassing it economically." Hungary by 1989 will spend 92 percent of export earnings to service its debt.[5] Poland has a 27-percent inflation rate and a foreign debt of nearly $38 billion—the highest among the six nations.[6] East European trade fell 15 percent, about $17 billion, in 1986, with Hungary alone suffering a $1.4 billion deficit in its current account. The severe winter of 1986-1987 was responsible for some of the problems, but structural defects also account for worsening economic strains.[7]

Political leaders in the six East European countries are beginning limited efforts to reform and restructure national economies. In Poland, a 29 November 1987 referendum seeking support for "full implementation" of an economic recovery plan and the "deep democratization of political life" was rejected by voters fearing the harsh effects of severe austerity measures which included consumer price increases of more than 100 per-

cent.[8] This result was a clear setback for the Jaruzelski regime, which proclaimed the vote to be a "high form of universal consultation."[9]

Following this defeat, the Polish government announced that food prices would rise about 40 percent, gasoline by 60 percent, and housing and urban transportation by 50 percent. While prices for electricity and heating fuels were scheduled to increase from 100 to 200 percent this year, incomes are to be raised to soften the blow, perhaps in acknowledgement of the unrest and strikes caused by prior price increases in 1956, 1970, and 1980.[10]

In Hungary, similar austerity measures were proposed by the government. Despite its proclaimed "economic miracle," growth has bottomed out and nearly 40 percent of the population lives at or below the subsistence level. With a $16 billion external debt—East Europe's highest on a per capita basis—veteran party leader Janos Kadar, who has just turned 76, secured parliamentary approval in September 1987 for the East bloc's first value added tax and personal income tax.[11] These taxes, combined with reduced subsidies for consumer goods and businesses, are expected to reduce real income by 15 percent. As many as 500,000 people in this country of 10 million could lose their jobs under the provisions of a new bankruptcy law which would close inefficient enterprises. Unrest is possible this year as the new legislation takes effect.[12]

Romania is also reeling under the strain of centrally imposed economic measures. With a population and land area second only to Poland, it is the poorest, least developed, and most repressive country in Eastern Europe. The only significant oil producer in the region, Romania has seen the worldwide decline in petroleum prices severely hurt its export earnings. Draconian conservation measures have kept winter indoor temperatures below 50°F., while food shortages have made bribery a virtual necessity for obtaining scarce goods.[13] In November of last year, widespread unrest led to the most serious riots in a decade when 5000 workers at a truck and tractor factory stormed the city hall in Brasov following pay cuts for failure to fulfill production goals. Nicolae Ceausescu, now 70, has led the Romanian Communist Party since 1965 and served as head of state since 1967. He has used enforced shortages to reduce the country's foreign debt, now at $6.6 billion, and further unrest among its 24 million citizens cannot be ruled out.[14]

Led by 76-year-old Todor Zhivkov, Bulgaria has undertaken to reduce the number of governmental districts and associated infrastructure from 28 to 9 and to place much of state industry on a self-financing basis. Party Politburo and Secretariat member Chudomir Aleksandrov acknowledged in September of last year that 19,000 provincial leaders would lose their jobs in this restructuring. "Have no fear," he said, "Bulgaria will continue to be a socialist country and will retain central planning."[15] By January 1988, this Balkan country of 9 million, which shares with Romania

the legacy of having no Soviet troops on its soil, was soft-pedaling reformist rhetoric, and a special party conference called to announce further changes ended inconclusively.[16]

The 15.7 million people who live in Czechoslovakia face an uncertain future following the resignation of Gustav Husak, 75, as party leader. Although he will continue to serve in the ceremonial role of president, Husak is largely known for his efforts to "normalize" Czechoslovakia following the 1968 Soviet-led invasion. He was succeeded on 17 December 1987 by Milos Jakes, now 65, a member of the party's presidium. Jakes, in an apparent reference to the lagging growth and structural decay within the country's production base, pledged to use new technology to "fundamentally increase the efficiency of the Czechoslovak economy." Coming at a time of reported resistance to reforms by the aged Prague leadership, this political shift may be a precursor to more fundamental changes in the country's economic structure.[17]

Not all economic statistics in the region are negative, of course. Three of the countries—East Germany, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia—generally enjoy a higher standard of living than the USSR, with East Germany's per-capita gross national product the highest in the communist world. East Germany's 17 million people produce goods considered the best of the Soviet bloc, and the $2 billion Pankow receives each year from West Germany in autobahn subsidies and border and emigration fees further buoys the economy.[18] To Erich Honecker, East Germany's 76-year-old head of party and state, the country's economic success has demonstrated the correctness of its economic strategy. This has led some observers to suggest that the German Democratic Republic rather than the economically ailing Hungary is the economic model Gorbachev is following.[19]

Economic difficulties have also been largely responsible for the region's inadequate health care and deteriorating social conditions. Throughout Eastern Europe, life expectancy is dropping and there are chronic inadequacies in state health care systems. In Bulgaria, much health care has been placed on a payment system, despite statutorily free medical care since 1951, and Romania has also recently adopted an optional fee-based medical service. In Czechoslovakia, statistics reveal worsening health conditions for the general population, with bribes common for obtaining appropriate care and scarce medicines. Poor diets are blamed for many medical ailments in East Germany, while obsolete equipment and aged facilities plague medical care in Hungary. Excessive drinking in Poland has been termed an "alcoholic time-bomb," while in Warsaw increases in cancer and psychiatric illnesses and a high incidence of tuberculosis are attributed to pollution, poor sanitation measures, and a shortage of medicines.[20]

Romania, because of its relative impoverishment and consequent need to expand its work force, has adopted an official policy of promoting

population growth. It prohibits the distribution of birth control information and contraceptives; abortions on demand are illegal; gynecological examinations are required each month for women of child-bearing age; childless couples are subject to fines; and a national campaign is under way to encourage an increased birthrate. Despite the fact that some abortions became legally permissible in 1985 for reasons of health, incest, and rape, there is considerable evidence that illegal abortions continue.[21]

Political and religious dissent, combined with vestiges of ethnic resurgence and nationalism, also beset the region. In Czechoslovakia, Charter 77 and its human rights advocates were banned from demonstrating on 10 December 1987 in honor of International Human Rights Day.[22] This followed the trial in January of Jazz Section activists, a counterculture group with several thousand members. Peace, human rights, and ecological movements have appeared sporadically throughout East Germany, most recently reflected in continuing protest vigils at Protestant churches. In Poland, the only private university in the Soviet bloc continues to irritate authorities. Financed primarily by contributions, the 4300 students and 400 professors of the Catholic University of Lublin provide a unique source of intellectual and religious stimulation to the country's 37.5 million population, of whom 95 percent are Catholic.[23]

Nationalism, both political and cultural, poses the greatest challenge to Soviet efforts to maintain stability and control in Eastern Europe. Nationalism is a state of mind with regard to ethnicity, race, political structures, and community goals and values. In Poland, the most socially homogeneous society in the region, it has been fused with religion. Nationalism has been used to legitimize the state and ruling Communist Party in East Germany and Romania, while, in contrast, it complicates official desires to achieve greater unity in Czechoslovakia, torn between Czech and Slovak loyalties. Because political nationalism encourages autonomy and provides credence to irredentist claims, it runs counter to Soviet efforts to achieve a supranationalist or internationalist outlook. Bilateral ties and multilateral organizations have been used by the USSR to keep such divisive influences in check, but they remain a force for potential disruption throughout the region.[24]

If East Europeans are aware of their stagnating economies, poor health care, and difficult living conditions, they are also conscious of widespread ecological devastation. According to James Bovard, "pollution is far worse in East Europe than elsewhere in the industrialized world."[25] In East Germany, 90 percent of the trees are diseased, dying, or dead. In Czechoslovakia, average human life expectancy has been reduced by as much as ten years in heavily industrialized regions. Ground water supplies are badly polluted in Poland; industrial and human wastes have fouled the Danube in Hungary; and steel mill pollutants have reduced visibility to near zero in certain areas surrounding Bulgaria's capital, Sofia. The high sulfur

composition of brown coal, increasingly used to replace oil, has poisoned the air in East Germany, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. In Bovard's apocalyptic view, "Socialist poverty will likely be destiny—and doom—for East Europe's environment."[26]

Integration and Alienation

Soviet leaders have sought the integration of this highly variegated region with little success. Non-Soviet Warsaw Pact forces are in need of modernization, and the political reliability of these forces remains a sensitive issue. From Nikita Khrushchev's rule to the current Gorbachev leadership, Moscow has sought to advance attitudinal and functional integration within its military alliance system. Attitudinal integration seeks to internalize "socialist values" and loyalty to both the Communist Party and the Warsaw Pact. For military reliability, functional integration—obedience to official norms and directives—is required. While the Warsaw Pact has apparently met this functional standard through the development of appropriate command and control mechanisms, it has failed to achieve the attitudinal norm, except among leadership cadre.[27]

Eastern Europe's aging political elites face a future constrained by economic disarray, ecological and social ills, structural maladjustment, and a separation of society from the state. The region's military forces have been functionally integrated, but their larger societies remain attitudinally alienated. For Moscow, the forces of disruption in this turbulent region are too overwhelming for the forces of integration to effectively control.

In the absence of attitudinal integration, the challenge to General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev in Eastern Europe is clear. For *perestroika* to produce the results *glasnost* promises, Gorbachev must grant greater autonomy to East European peoples and institutions despite the potential threat this poses to the basic premises of Moscow's political control.

Eastern Europe now provides the litmus test of communist systemic change. What occurs there will determine whether Gorbachev's preferred vision, peaceful or otherwise, will succeed beyond Soviet borders and whether the Soviet empire will improve or further stagnate. "Socialism in one country" was Stalin's response in 1924 when world revolution was not forthcoming. To revive and reinvigorate a larger and more diverse communist domain will require greater flexibility and tolerance than Moscow has thus far found acceptable. "*Glasnost* in one country"—but not in the empire—is the likely result.

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