

Eastern Europe: State of Societies

Overview

Eastern Europe is beset with enduring political and economic problems which if not carefully managed by both the domestic leaderships and Moscow could create future "hot spots." The populations do not seem volatile at present as the bitter experiences of past opposition and tight security controls have caused them to retreat into sullen apathy, consumerist socialism, and private pursuits. Nonetheless, there are enough traditional headaches such as poor economic performance and ethnic tensions as well as new concerns such as the environment and youth alienation to keep the pot bubbling in East European societies.

The East European regimes--with the recent exception of Romania--have sought to coopt their populations by providing an increasing standard of living, but economic pressures are making this increasingly hard to do.

- o Draconian austerity and Ceausescu's irrational economic policies have forced Romanians to focus on personal and family survival while the Polish population's preoccupation with eroding living standards remains a basic obstacle to reconciliation with the regime.
- o Economic problems are cutting ever more deeply into the social fabric in Hungary and Yugoslavia where inflation, stagnation, and widening economic inequalities are sowing confusion in the leadership and undermining the political consensus of these societies.

Ethnic tensions continue to simmer in several states and periodically lead to friction between countries.

- o The greatest threat to stability probably rests with the Serbs and Albanians in Yugoslavia although the Czech-Slovak rivalry for positions of power and economic resources could lead to bitter behind-the-scenes disputes in a post-Husak succession.
- o Reflecting the concerns of its populace, Hungary has been increasingly forthright in expressing displeasure with Romania's treatment of the Magyar minority in Transylvania, protests that Bucharest views as unwarranted interference.

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- o A new sense of assertiveness and "German-ness" has become increasingly evident in the GDR, apparently provoking friction with Moscow.

Although the Polish Catholic Church is the only East European church able to confront authorities on policy issues, religious groups in several countries appear to be attracting more adherents disaffected with regime values and seeking a quasi-legitimate forum for dissent.

Environmentalism has similarly attracted growing popular attention--particularly in the wake of the Chernobyl accident. The impact has been greatest in Yugoslavia, where widespread objections have forced Belgrade to reassess its nuclear power program, but the Polish, East German, and Hungarian regimes have also had to demonstrate greater attention to popular concerns. Because environmental issues reflect a generally accepted social good, they provide oppositionists a comparatively safe forum for questioning regime policies.

Throughout the region, the younger generation seems particularly dispirited by the stagnation in these societies and alienated from Communist ideology and regimes.

- o In more westward-looking regions such as the GDR and some Yugoslav republics, some young people have been galvanized by youth activism in the West and have formed rudimentary protest movements on issues such as arms control, human rights, and the environment.
- o On balance, most East European youth currently seem too complacent or apathetic to engage in serious unrest. Nonetheless, they are an ideologically uncommitted, politically unstable element that could cause more serious trouble in the future if not given a greater stake in these societies. Indeed, a small but growing number of Polish youth have resorted to violence.

Albania

Tirane's xenophobic isolation ensures the regime's continuing stranglehold on society.

- o Seized by its paranoia of outsiders, the regime wages a continuing puritanical battle against Western influence among Albanian young people, a problem aggravated by easy reception in many areas of Italian, Greek, and Yugoslav broadcasts.
- o Over the longer term, economic problems and the regime's cautious opening to the West may pose growing problems for Tirane in blunting the attraction of Western culture among Albanian youth and intellectuals.

Bulgaria

Despite growing economic aproblems, the society is remarkably stable, partly because the party is so entrenched Soviet influence so pervasive, and possible centers of opposition weak to nonexistent.

- o The regime's assimilation campaign against ethnic Turks sparked violence and has left the Turkish minority even more wary and resentful of its Slavic masters. The problem caused the regime the most grief internationally, however--smearing Sofia's image in Western capitals, embarrassing the Soviets, and adding to Moscow's displeasure with Zhivkov.
- o The regime routinely harasses the Catholic Church and several Protestant denominations, but these groups are small and virtually powerless.

Czechoslovakia

Czechoslovak society is marked by stability, despite the almost complete estrangement of the populace from the Communist leadership. Social unrest or unmanageable dissent probably will not be a problem for the government in the short term, but several economic, social and political trends could prove troublesome farther down the road.

Living Standards

The Husak regime has maintained a tacit social contract with the population since 1968 in which it has provided one of the highest standards of living in Eastern Europe in return for widespread political apathy. Economic growth and consumption levels have stagnated in recent years, however.

- o The leadership faces difficult choices among increasing long-neglected investment, boosting living standards, and meeting Soviet demands for more exports.
- o While Prague probably will not be able to provide significant gains in consumption in the future, the regime probably can prevent living standards from falling below politically acceptable levels.

Ethnic Tensions

Czech - Slovak ethnic tensions continue to simmer at various levels of society. The majority Czechs resent Slovak domination of the country's economy and government.

- o Slovaks control several key government and party positions: Husak is party leader and president, and Bilak is the CPCZ's number two man, controlling both ideology and foreign policy.
- o Slovakia has received a disproportionate amount of investment since 1968.

While ethnic tensions have historically hindered consensus-building in Czechoslovakia, they have not resulted in outright unrest and are not likely to do so today. The Czechs probably will move to regain control of the regime's top positions after the departure of Gustav Husak and will try to tip the economic balance back in favor of the Czech lands.

- o Any Czech reassertion of power, however, will almost certainly be balanced by the principle of ethnic proportionality. Political confrontations, though potentially bitter, will probably be kept behind closed doors.

Dissident Groups

Charter 77 and the Catholic Church are the two major sources of dissent in the CSSR. In the near future, the activities of Church members present more potential for political and social instability than Charter 77, a group of intellectual dissenters who have found little resonance within society.

- o Charter 77 is seen as a Czech phenomenon that does not address the Slovak populace.
- o The human rights orientation of its message holds little appeal for many inward-looking Czechoslovaks, who are more concerned with material comfort.

The Catholic Church, on the other hand can boast of a widespread network of members that by its nature is a grassroots organization.

- o Its leader, Cardinal Tomasek, is the focal point of reverence due to his strong moral stance.
- o Youth disaffection from "consumer socialism" and lack of real social participation is leading a growing number to turn to the Church for moral and spiritual guidance.

Continued state repression of legal as well as illegal practitioners is creating the atmosphere where clandestine worship is the only alternative for many.

- o This reflects the regime's alarm over its inability to control the Church and over the Church's potential to become a center of opposition.
- o If stalemate occurs in naming an eventual successor to the 87-year old Tomasek, the lack of moral focus in the public Church could lead others into the underground, presenting the regime with an even more serious problem of control.

East Germany

The mass of the GDR populace can best be described as politically inert and resigned to pursuing material interests within the bounds set by an internal security apparatus presumed to be omnipresent.

- o The experience of a failed revolt in 1953, the presence of 400,000 Soviet troops, and the strongest economy and highest living standard in Eastern Europe strengthen this tendency.

But this veneer of apathy and retreat into materialism can only partially obscure several countervailing tendencies.

- o Some young people have been galvanized by West German youth activism concerning current world issues (arms control, human rights, ecology) and have coalesced into rudimentary political protest movements.
- o To a lesser degree, the public at large fears the East-West conflict over arms control, tending to blame each competing alliance roughly equally.
- o Increasing environmental pollution and especially the GDR's reticent handling of the Chernobyl disaster has upset the public at large and eroded even more of the regime's credibility as a guardian of the public welfare.
- o The autonomous Protestant (mainly Lutheran) Churches act as a protective umbrella for the unofficial peace movement and as a clearing house for ecological information.
- o Despite their relatively high standard of living, the East Germans' expectations are yet higher, as they compare themselves not to Romania or Poland, but to "the other" Germany, to which they are exposed constantly by FRG television and travelers.
- o Efforts in recent years to improve economic efficiency and labor productivity have created some unemployment.
- o Disgruntlement over shortages is chronic, but rarely leads to significant incidents of worker or consumer unrest.

As always, the impact of West Germany and the pull of German national sentiment remain variables which the GDR regime and Soviets never forget.

- o In our view, this sentiment is more of a latent than active variable. East Germans appear to believe their fate is not in their own hands, but in those of the Bonn government, which negotiates on their behalf with the regime to ease their lot.

- o Disgruntlement over travel prohibitions may be the public's main bone of contention, intensified presumably by large number of West German travelers to the GDR.
- o The most discontented do not rebel, but emigrate or escape to the FRG.
- o Traditional anti-Slavic feelings strengthen popular antipathy to the overbearing Soviets and their occupation troops, but most people appear to accept Soviet dominance as an unavoidable consequence of losing the war.
- o A new sense of assertiveness and "German-ness" on the part of the regime has been evident in recent years as GDR "comes of age," and takes growing pride in its economic accomplishments. This appears to be a source of friction between Moscow and East Berlin.

Hungary

Party leader Kadar largely succeeded in healing the wounds of 1956 and made Hungary a model of stability and prosperity in Eastern Europe by forging a social consensus based on consumerism and relaxed relations between the party and the people. The consensus is now fraying, however, largely as a result of economic stresses and the approach of succession.

Increasing Social Strains

Economic hardships and inequalities are at the root of the public's souring mood.

- o Rising inflation has forced most Hungarians to work second jobs just to maintain their standard of living. The resulting stress has produced an increased incidence of suicides, divorces, alcoholism and crime.
- o The problem is compounded by growing income inequalities. The few who have prospered through permitted private enterprise and blatantly illegal activities have tended to flaunt their wealth before the many.
- o Urban industrial workers appear particularly resentful. Unconfirmed reports of strikes have reached the West, and workers voiced unprecedented criticism of the ailing economy and feeble union performance at the trade union congress held earlier this year.
- o The regime appears concerned that an alternative workers' movement similar to Solidarity could emerge if economic conditions do not improve or if the unions are not more successful in winning worker allegiance.

Growing Political Confusion

Hungarian society is permeated by a sense of political confusion and ideological contradictions. Hungarians complain openly about a sense of drift in policy making and a lack of leadership.



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- o Officials who have been assigned new responsibilities as part of the reform often do not understand their new duties or disagree with them. The result is inactivity and inertia among institutional leaders.
- o There is no clear ideological consensus on public policies. Even within the party, opinion is divided over



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the doctrinal legitimacy of such things as private boutiques and prices that are linked to market forces.

Social Groups to Watch

Increased social strains and confusion have not had great impact so far, although continued economic stagnation and political uncertainty may lead to instability.

- o Dissidents are not now numerous, well-organized, or very influential. Only if they unite on a common platform, bridge the gap to the workers, or benefit from the fertile ground created by declining living standards can they hope to influence public opinion.
- o Many Hungarian intellectuals feel a rebirth of nationalist sentiment centered on concern for Hungarian minorities abroad. They put what pressure they can on the regime to aid the Magyars in Transylvania and Slovakia. If the regime responds, it may run afoul of its neighbors and the Soviet Union; if it does not, it may lose further credibility, which it can ill afford during a period of economic stagnation.
- o Hungarian youth are disproportionately hurt by the current economic troubles. Since they did not experience the trauma of 1956, they may be more likely to express their alienation and frustrations politically, perhaps even resorting to violence. They form an ideologically uncommitted, politically unstable element that may cause serious trouble in the future if they are not better integrated into the society.
- o An environmental movement composed of intellectuals, dissidents, students, and other concerned citizens has formed to oppose the construction of a hydroelectric project on the Danube. This issue holds the potential for uniting diverse elements of the opposition, but it may not last beyond the beginning of construction.

Poland

Six years after the birth of Solidarity, most of the same conditions exist that brought about the prolonged workers' strike in Gdansk and the formation of the union.

- o The average Pole is preoccupied with eroding living standards and mistrustful of reforms that entail austerity measures.
- o The populace remains dissatisfied over the regime's suppression of Solidarity, does not subscribe to official claims of normalization, and does not believe the current regime can emerge from the crisis.

Additional social problems have intensified as a result of the ongoing political and economic crisis.

- o Poland is in the grip of a health crisis: salmonella poisoning is up 50 percent over last year because of unsanitary public eating places; infant death rates have risen in dirty maternity wards; pharmaceuticals will be in short supply into the next decade; Poland cannot even produce a toothbrush that meets minimum WHO standards.
- o Environmental problems have attained catastrophic proportions and since Chernobyl have overtaken economic and political issues in some opposition quarters as the major focus of attention.
- o Alcoholism and drug abuse have risen dramatically and have become the focus of government and Church abstention programs. POLMOS, the state alcohol monopoly, consistently ranks number one in revenues in the Polish version of the "Fortune 500."

Opposition to the regime remains alive even though government controls and punitive measures have reduced the level of demonstrations and active resistance.

- o Workers, according to recent Solidarity-endorsed polls, are politically apathetic, prefer socialism, but mistrust the regime. Few appear willing to work hard to bring the country out of its economic crisis.
- o Most youth remain disaffected from the regime and a small, but growing number are willing to turn to violence. A Gdansk anarchist group attacked ZOMO troops on May Day 1985 and later that summer rioted at the annual Jarocin rock festival.
- o The underground is evolving into a classic East European dissident movement dominated by disaffected intellectuals,

but one that remains a threat to the regime because it maintains its ties to the workers through educational and cultural programs.

- o The Church hierarchy actively supports the underground's nonviolent educational activities and is increasingly becoming impatient with the regime's failure to lead the country out of its political and economic crisis.

ROMANIA

Romanian society is deeply divided along ethnic, social, and regional lines and can fall prey to intense nationalist sentiments. The country's unending economic crisis has added to the strains in this society but a direct challenge to Ceausescu's rule seem unlikely.

Nationalism

One result of Romania's long--and only partially successful--quest for national independence and identity has been the development of an intense, sometimes xenophobic Romanian nationalism. This nationalism is shared, encouraged and sometimes exploited by the government.

- o While this nationalism has been used to paper over some social divisions, it has led to tensions with minorities, especially Hungarians, who number nearly two million, about 10% of the population. In recent years, Hungary has been more forthright in expressing concern over Bucharest's repression of its Hungarians in Transylvania and efforts to isolate them from Budapest. Bucharest views such protests as signs of continuing Hungarian irredentism.

Economic Troubles

The slide in living standards since 1980, which has included draconian rationing of basic food staples, gasoline, home and office heating and declines in medical and social services, has seriously cut public morale, but widespread, organized resistance is unlikely to develop soon.

- o Centuries of cruel and exploitive rule have taught Romanians to survive through simple endurance, suspiciousness of outsiders, and avoidance of direct challenges to authority.
- o In the face of current hardships brought about by exploitive and irrational Stalinist economic policies, the population's typical reaction is to "hunker down" and look for ways to assure personal and family survival through barter, bribery, personal connections or exploitation of cracks in the system.

Lack of Opposition

In the past, President Ceausescu has been able to deflect discontent through a popular nationalist foreign policy, occasional veiled warnings about an alleged Soviet or Hungarian "threat", scapegoating of lesser officials, intimidation by the pervasive security apparatus and (intentionally or otherwise) by

having criticism focus on his powerful but unpopular wife. This is no longer working as well: popular grumbling now focuses on Ceausescu himself, and wishful thinking has led to widespread rumors of his ill-health.

Nevertheless, the absence of any national institutions independent of the government and the general climate of stoicism and fatalism make the concept of nationally-organized resistance alien to most Romanians.

- o The Romanian Orthodox Church is effectively run by the government and smaller, more dissident denominations represent only a tiny fraction of Romanian believers.
- o Virtually all independent-minded members of the Romanian intelligentsia have been forced to emigrate; those who remain have been largely coopted by the government, and are isolated from other social classes.
- o In the past, extremes of oppression have sparked sudden, disorganized and intensely violent peasant revolts; this could eventually happen again. So far, however, Ceausescu has shown a good feel for the limits of the population's endurance, and has successfully isolated and quashed sporadic, localized protests.

Possible Succession Scenarios

An in-house coup, though unlikely, could occur if the situation threatened a nationwide revolt. There are few obvious candidates for a succession, however. If Ceausescu were to die tomorrow, his most likely immediate successor would be his wife, but only for a very short time.

- o Prolonged indecision during a succession crisis could bring all these social tensions to the fore, but the leadership is aware of this and will feel compelled to put on at least a show of unity as quickly as possible.

Yugoslavia

More than six years after Tito's death, Yugoslavia is proving to be relatively stable and resilient, but centrifugal regional forces and ethnic tension are hampering Belgrade's ability to govern. The self-confident Yugoslavs of Tito's days are now unsure about the future, preoccupied by falling living standards, and alienated from a complex, inefficient political system.

- o The Communist party has clearly lost prestige in the population's eyes--as seen in its difficulties in recruiting new members--and respect for other political institutions is hardly greater. Nonetheless, the public appears too self-absorbed, demoralized, accepting, or divided to stage nationwide protests.
- o Moreover, there is no consensus on policies for change and the above traits suggest the public is unlikely to develop the sense of duty and sacrifice needed for economic and political recovery.

Economic Woes

Public unhappiness with slow growth, run-away inflation, high unemployment and a declining living standard has prompted the new Mikulic government to respond with emergency measures.

- o Although the public seemingly welcomes the appearance of decisive government action and tougher controls it has resisted the program's restraints on income and consumption. Unhappiness over new wage controls has provoked a rising tide of strikes.
- o Disparities in wealth and economic development among the different regions are widening, an intolerable situation to many in a communist society.
- o Discontent with economic ills, however, is tempered by the opportunities available to earn income in the very active second economy. While less numerous than in the past, opportunities to work abroad also continue to serve as a safety valve for the more ambitious of the unemployed.

Ethnic Strains

The greatest threat to stable relations among the many ethnic groups currently comes from the Serbs, a large and historically forceful group in the south, and from Albanians who make up about 80 percent of Serbia's autonomous province of Kosovo. Many Serbs feel resentful about their lost influence at the national level and in Kosovo.

- o Kosovo Serbs staged several demonstrations in recent months protesting their treatment, and the national leadership has had to intervene to promote calm.

Anti-nuclear Power Movement

Growing and unusually broad-based anti-nuclear sentiment--reinforced by the Chernobyl accident--has become one of the salient features of the current Yugoslav public mood.

- o Youth groups have been among the most outspoken and visible opponents of nuclear power, but the movement has found adherents in nearly all interest groups in society. Polls following Chernobyl showed that three-quarters of adult respondents believed nuclear plants to be unnecessary.
- o The movement has already forced Belgrade to reassess its plans for nuclear power, a nearly unprecedented development in Yugoslavia's elite-dominated decisionmaking process.

Youth Unhappiness

Recent months have seen some increase in protests by young Yugoslavs, particularly in the more advanced westward-looking republics of Slovenia and Croatia.

- o The official Slovene youth organization in April called for sweeping liberalization of the Communist system, including direct elections and legalization of dissent. Slovene and Croatian youth groups have also played a leading role in the anti-nuclear power movement.
- o National youth day festivities featured unusual barbs against bureaucracy, unemployment, and nuclear power.
- o Recent public opinion polls revealed a high level of alienation among young Serbs from the Communist party and officially-sponsored labor groups.

Most youth, however, seem too complacent or apathetic to engage in more serious unrest.

- o Polls show that a majority of young Serbs, including the unemployed are satisfied with their lot. Such attitudes are even stronger in the poorer republics.

Background Paper on East European Countries for D/EURA

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