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Revolutionary Change in Eastern Europe: the Societal Basis of Political Reform

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The year 1989 proved to be one of monumental importance for the Soviet Union, the countries of Eastern Europe, and the entire international community At the beginning of the year, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev found only limited support among the political elites of Eastern Europe for his conception of political reform Only the communist party leadership in Poland and Hungary could be viewed as committed reformers Elsewhere, the concept of reform received little more than lip service (in Bulgaria), was generally criticized (in Czechoslovakia and the GDR), or was most strongly condemned (in Romania) Even in Poland and Hungary the pace of reform was slow and seemed on the verge of stalling By the end of the year, a Solidarity government ruled Poland, the Berlin Wall had fallen, Ceausescu s dictatorship had been overthrown in Romania, and a world-renowned dissident playwright, Vaclav Havel, had been elected president in Czechoslovakia Revolutionary change—in the full sense of the term revolutionary —was in process throughout the region, as the basic structures of domestic political power (including the formal institutions of governance) as well as the structures of the European inter-state system were radically changing

Only four times during the past two centuries have events of such importance for the nature of domestic and international political relationships occurred in Europe 1) during the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, when France attempted to destroy the old political order and replace it with a French-centered system of nominally democratic states, 2) after the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, when the old order was in large part reestablished by the victors, 3) after World War I and the collapse of the traditional European empires and their replacement by a number of small states in Central Europe and a regime in Soviet Russia committed to revolutionary change, and 4) after World War II when the geographic and political map of Europe was changed once more by the collapse of traditional European states and the emergence of the USSR and the United States as the dominant actors in Europe and the world The changes initiated during 1989 promise to have consequences comparable to those associated with the four earlier periods of revolutionary restructuring

Though the economic and political tensions of forty years of Soviet domination, autocratic rule by local communist elites, and economic mismanagement and corruption were increasingly apparent throughout Eastern Europe, there was little overt evidence in early 1989 that events of such import were about to occur—though social pressures were building that would explode later in the year Central to the dramatic changes throughout the region that resulted, by the end of 1989, in the establishment of Eastern Europe s first non-communist governments since the 1940s, was the new attitude of the Gorbachev leadership toward the area In the past, any movement toward reform met with strong Soviet resistance By 1989, the

Soviet government had shifted to the point where it encouraged reform and was even willing to accept the reality of expanded pluralism and the demise of communist dictatorships as the price for economic efficiency and political stability in the region, and enhanced long-term stable political and economic relationships with the West

Yet, the radical changes that occurred in Eastern Europe during the last six months of 1989 must be viewed within the overall framework of state socialism as it was institutionalized in the area and the recent emergence of autonomous social groups that developed in the Soviet Union in the 1930s under Stalin and in Eastern Europe In the late 1940s, state socialism consisted of a highly centralized economy that emphasized heavy industry, authoritarian political structures meant to ensure political control by miniscule and illegitimate communist party elites, and a strong dependency on patron-client relationships between the USSR and the smaller communist states of Eastern Europe However, almost immediately after Stalin s death in 1953 and throughout the ensuing years, evidence mounted that demonstrated both the political and the economic weaknesses of the system Sporadically and unsuccessfully until 1989, attempts were made in various parts of the countries concerned to reform portions of the state socialist system inherited from Stalin

After the signing of the Helsinki Accords of 1975, organized movements committed to the protection of political and human rights were active (and under pressure) in a number of European communist states Usually, these groups based their demands for political reform on the commitments made by their governments in Helsinki and on the guarantees of the constitutions of their respective states

Evidence also mounted throughout much of the region concerning the stagnation of economic growth and the fact that the socialist economies were falling behind their capitalist counterparts, including those of the East Asian NICs, in the development and adaptation of modern technology to the production process In addition, the inability of the state to meet implied social commitments—i e , the growing shortages of consumer goods and housing, the inability to halt the degradation of the environment, etc — contributed to increased dissatisfaction with the existing political system and to the demand for major political change that would extend effective political participation beyond the narrow circle of the communist party elite

Even before the emergence to political prominence of Mikhail Gorbachev and new thinking in the USSR, evidence existed of a growing awareness of the fundamental nature of the problems facing communist states, the imperatives of initiating economic and political reform, and the expanding flexibility in relations between the USSR and its European allies Thus, prior to spring 1985 when Gorbachev was elected the new head of the

Communist Party of the Soviet Union the situation throughout much of the region was ripe for political change However, only since 1985 have the efforts at reform expanded to the point where one can speak of the dismantling of key elements of the traditional state socialist system—from the dominance of central planning to the emergence of officially sanctioned pluralism and the decline of the dominant role of the communist *nomenklatura*

The major concern of this study will be to provide a background and overview of developments throughout Eastern Europe that have contributed to the dramatic changes currently underway in the entire region—especially the importance of the emergence of autonomous interest groups for political reform—and to relate those changes to developments within the USSR itself Given the importance of and the differences in developments in individual countries, we shall deal briefly with each of the countries in turn—beginning with those with the strongest and most visible recent tradition of reform, Poland and Hungary, and concluding with Romania which, prior to the revolution of December 1989, was ruled by a most adamantly Stalinist leadership It is essential to keep in mind that we are observing and attempting to assess a process of change and reform that is in midstream, that the events of 1989, for example, are but part of a process Whether stable pluralist, democratic political systems and effectively functioning economies will emerge from the current chaos into which traditional state socialist systems have fallen, is not at all clear

Poland

The irony of Poland is of a society that has probably moved the furthest toward genuine political pluralism, despite the crackdowns and imposition of martial law in 1981-1983 Moreover, it has been Poland which, to a substantial degree, served as a stimulus to (or, at least, catalyst for) reform elsewhere in Eastern Europe Autonomous societal initiatives for reform had begun long before Solidarity became synonymous with Polish opposition In the pre-Solidarity years, analysts identified three main currents from which society would press reforms on state authority intellectuals and students, industrial workers, and the Catholic Church While relatively isolated from each other, these interests achieved a degree of convergence during periods of systemic crisis at the top, as in 1968-70 [1] In 1968, students and intellectuals presented demands for greater freedom of expression, but remained isolated from workers, while in 1970-71 workers struck en masse for economic demands and confronted state suppression without the support of the intellectuals and students [2] As the economic and social situation worsened throughout the country, the center of gravity of reform shifted from limited circles of intellectuals to a broader social strain involving thousands prepared to engage in public protest What occurred during this period was the gradual evolution of a social movement which shifted its strategy from attempting to

influence the system by exerting pressure from within the party, to an emphasis on social pressure from outside designed to transform the relationship between state and society [3]

The worker strikes of 1970-71 were brought about in part because of a decline in real wages and a general neglect in living standards Indeed, some analysts contend that Poland suffered crises of identity, penetration, and participation, most severely, of all the European socialist countries [4] While these crises escalated during the 1970s, numerous organs of direct democracy were founded, such as the workers councils in Szczecin which proved troubling to authorities since they could never be brought under complete control By the mid-1970s, a significant number of autonomous civic organizations such as the Workers Defense Committee (KOR), came into being because existing official institutions had failed to realize their objectives and clearly could not meet citizen needs It was up to new groups to limit the state s decision-making power and to introduce innovation into the social system [5]

Because of the extensive development of autonomous social groups over the decades, Poland remains the laboratory *par excellence* for observing the relationship between system performance and societal initiatives for reform Scholars have catalogued a bewildering array of autonomous associations derived from pluralist elements in society, such as the three currents noted above [6] In the Solidarity Period of 1980-81, a full range of societal interests and groups developed a successful coalition strategy of consolidated pluralism that mobilized the majority of society against the regime [7] This effort had the direct impact of diminishing the preeminence of the Polish United Workers Party (PUWP) as the leading and guiding force in Polish society in the years following the suppression of Solidarity Subsequent efforts to promote a political dialogue between non-party interest organizations and PUWP-sponsored associations such as PRON, failed—made all the worse by steadily deteriorating economic conditions

Until 1986-87 there was at least some discernible weakening of opposition efforts, as the number of independent activists declined markedly after the lifting of martial law and the issuance of an amnesty for political prisoners Yet, pluralist ideals and hoped-for reforms were at an all time high among citizens [8] The veritable explosion of civic activity in 1988-89 was no less than the direct outcome of a seriously weakened state with disastrous economic problems including a severe slide in living standards and an increasingly well organized and determined civil society which not only survived the crackdown of 1980-81, but benefited from the party s tarnished image In fact, the opposition in the post-1981 period had become considerably diversified, with at least four key tendencies identified [9] the legitimacy trend which wanted to continue the Solidarity movement, the realistic opposition which emphasized expanding the sphere of freedom, the

political radicals who emphasized winning national sovereignty and building a democratic system, and the church-oriented opposition These categories serve as a rough means to typologize the hundreds of new groups that emerged in Poland in 1987-1989 [10]

It is scarcely surprising that by January 1989, the PUWP Central Committee had passed a pluralism resolution amidst heated debate and apprehension of officials that the leadership s new strategy of legalizing independent trade unions could prove to be suicidal [11] Less than a month later, Politburo members began deliberating the prospects for a multiparty system, where the PUWP might give up its leading role if ousted by a legitimate successor [12] While the regime did not define clearly what type of alternative party would be considered legitimate, some officials expressed the desire for competing socialist parties vying for the voters favor in free elections Nonetheless, a variety of parties representing different ideological positions either appeared or, in the case of pre-communist parties, attempted to reestablish their existence From nationalist-oriented organizations like the Polish Independence Party to the resurrected Polish Socialist Party, a clearly multi-party spectrum had emerged to challenge the PUWP s position Other, more narrow, autonomous interest organizations joined those already in existence, representing a broad spectrum of views and programs Environmental groups, such as the Polish Ecological Party, joined existing organizations like Freedom and Peace to advocate environmental reforms These efforts had a discernible impact on policy making, in 1988, Freedom and Peace collected over two thousand signatures in Gdansk to protest the building of the first Polish nuclear power station at Zarnowiec, resulting in government officials reassessing the project s viability [13]

Another important development in 1989 which spurred reform efforts was the establishment, by independent groups, of umbrella organizations that could defend them more effectively against the state Government officials agreed to accept the establishment of separate public groups to deal with economic problems, a tacit admission of the party s failure to respond adequately to the continuing economic stalemate [14] The economic associations would operate alongside the existing semi-private and private enterprises already flourishing in Poland and they would emphasize the importance of capital investment and market principles These initiatives, along with many others including recently-concluded negotiations between the regime and Solidarity, were taken by organized citizens, and not by local officials, elites, or specialists

In Poland, more than in any of the other East European countries, the spontaneous growth of independent activity and its gradual politicization have been fueled by the failure of a highly centralized system A delegitimized communist leadership would offer nothing to stem the

growing tide of demands from autonomous interest groups aimed at pushing the country in a pluralist direction with a functioning parliamentary system

Unlike the then-hardline regimes of East Germany and Czechoslovakia, however, Poland s relationship with Gorbachev s USSR was convivial to the extent that the Soviets showed much more understanding of the complexity of the Polish situation The Jaruzelski leadership was less concerned about the spillover effects of Soviet reforms than with the positive endorsement that such reforms lent to Poland s own efforts [15] Gorbachev was praised for showing energy, boldness, and farsightedness in pursuing reforms and also for taking a realistic stance about the nature and limits of intra-bloc relations Until Jaruzelski stepped down from power, however, there were no overt gestures of concern about the prospects for substantial economic and political instability in the immediate future Moscow remained calm during the roundtable discussions between the Polish government and Solidarity that led to the legalization of the independent labor movement and the electoral reforms of spring, 1989

The June election stood as the most far-reaching manifestation of the reform process in Eastern Europe until the upheavals of fall, 1989 In terms of formal political power the reforms were meant to limit the power of the opposition The elections for the newly-established 100-seat Senate were entirely free, while only 35 percent of the 460 seats for the Sejm or lower house, were filled through competitive contests The results, however, proved a stunning defeat for the ruling Polish United Workers Party PUWP candidates failed to win a single seat where there was a contested race Solidarity candidates took all but one of the seats lost by the PUWP and received an average of 70 percent of the total popular vote Moreover, all but two of thirty five key PUWP figures who ran unopposed, failed to gain the required majority of the votes cast to ensure reelection Government efforts to limit the impact of the new electoral system failed largely because the voters were able to strike off so many officials from the ballot [16]

Over the summer, much political jockeying occurred before the emergence of a Solidarity-led government in September In July, the issue was the selection of a new president Only after once withdrawing from the race and pushing the candidacy of Interior Minister General Czeslaw Kiszczak, was General Jaruzelski eventually elected president on 19 July by the margin of a single vote After his election to the presidency, Jaruzelski fulfilled an earlier pledge by resigning as head of the PUWP Though the communists successfully pushed General Kiszczak through parliament as prime minister, he failed in his efforts to form a grand coalition government and on 24 August, Tadeusz Mazowiecki was elected prime minister Mazowiecki, a Catholic intellectual with extensive political experience, had played a major role in the creation of Solidarity in 1980 He was editor-in-

chief of *Tygodnik Solidarnosc*, the communist bloc s first fully independent weekly

After decades of the most intense and tenacious opposition activity in the region, the Poles had broken the political dominance of the communist party For the first time since World War II, Poland has a non-communist prime minister and a true coalition government—but one faced with imminent collapse of the economy and problems of generating effective public support for economic reform politics

Hungary

In Hungary, the path toward reform has differed from that taken in Poland or elsewhere in the region, complicated by the now-diminishing economic prosperity brought about by Kadarism in the wake of the 1956 revolution and Soviet military suppression The democratic opposition in Hungary was largely confined to a handful of intellectuals who did not engage in creating or advocating the establishment of rival political parties or other institutional challenges [17] Recent economic problems led to an evaluation of the need for political reforms to supplant the secret corporatism of the Kadar period While the former party leader spoke of the need for autonomy within a one-party system, some officials argued openly that only Western-type pluralism with multiple parties would represent a real improvement [18]

Scarcely a decade before, however, analysts generally agreed that the likelihood of well-entrenched political elites suddenly opening the floodgates to admit average citizens into the privilege of autonomous decision-making in politics and economics, seemed remote at best [19] Yet, even then, Hungarians, such as philosopher Gyorgy Markus and sociologist Andras Hegedus, were openly expressing the necessity of pluralism in a Marxist system While the government gradually began to tinker with political mechanisms such as multi-candidate elections in 1985, some analysts began to discuss the serious possibility of real political pluralism Party officials categorically rejected competitive, Western-style pluralism, using the historical justification that Hungary had evolved as a one-party system and what was needed was recognition of a plurality of interests [20] Given that multi-candidate systems were already established in Poland and Romania and had not resulted in a challenge to party control, it appeared doubtful that the opposition could use the electoral changes to effect a political breakthrough

In the early 1980s, spurred by an international climate of tension between the United States and the Soviet Union, a burst of opposition activity had occurred in Hungary that focused on peace and disarmament issues Spearheaded by the Peace Group for Dialogue, a movement involving a handful of autonomous peace groups, this activity challenged the official Peace Council s legitimacy and involved relatively large numbers of citizens

in anti-nuclear activities [21] Dialogue was forced to disband in 1983, after refusing to merge with the Peace Council, a host of lesser groups either followed Dialogue s example or were absorbed into official institutions

Until recently, this was the pattern of societally initiated reform activity in Hungary A handful of dissident intellectuals would organize around a specific set of issues and disband relatively soon thereafter By the mid-1980s, however, concrete social initiatives reappeared from what dissident Gabor Demsky called suspended animation [22] Acknowledging that the various groupings in society did not yet know what to demand, he noted the fact that independent groups were undertaking large-scale tasks traditionally within the responsibility of official social institutions These included supporting refugees from neighboring Transylvania, offering legal aid to citizens, and attempting to create some sort of organization dedicated to the protection of workers and young peoples interests Indeed, as in Poland, the development of parallel institutions was unprecedented in the wake of inertia and creeping incompetence of official institutions

Many of these initiatives were resurrected efforts at grass-roots citizen impact on policy making In 1981, an autonomous environmental group, the Danube Circle, was created in Hungary to articulate public outcry over the proposed diversion of the Danube between Gabcikovo in Slovakia and Nagymaros in Hungary as part of an immense hydroelectric project While the government expressed its own reservations about the project, its hesitation led to the Danube Circles collecting some 10,000 signatures by 1986 Facing severe government disapproval for operating outside the official sphere, the group disbanded in 1986, prompting some writers to posit that such citizen activity is doomed to failure, both in Hungary and throughout Eastern Europe By 1988-89, however, activity resumed in cooperation with two other groups, the Danube Foundation and the Nagymaros Committee [23] The renewed effort collected over 100,000 signatures, was endorsed by nineteen members of parliament, and eventually, by summer 1989, forced the government to halt the project [24]

Despite some harassment, the controversial Federation of Young Democrats (FIDESZ) achieved the status of an officially recognized alternative to the Communist Youth League (KISZ) The group was first declared illegal for advocating a multiparty system and a free market economy, but persistence and an increasingly large nationwide membership guaranteed its new legal status [25] Moreover, at its first national congress in November 1988, the group joined a newly created umbrella organization, the National Council of Youth Organizations in Hungary, which served as a channel for shared information and a forum for discussion among Hungary s independent youth groups While the council also included the official group KISZ, it was understood that no one group would have authority over

another, and relations between the official and independent groups would remain minimal [26]

Across Hungary some thirty or more new organizations were established with aims ranging from support of glasnost to the reestablishment of Western-style democracy As in Poland, Hungarian civil society found expression in new and old political parties, as well as protective umbrella organizations The independent Smallholders Party and the Social Democratic Party are but two of the opposition parties which will compete with the recently renamed Hungarian communist party in the 1990 elections [27]

More important from a reform perspective, have been the communist party debates surrounding the status of multiple political parties Although memory of the brief reemergence of pre-war parties of 1956 left officials understandably concerned, many now admit that it is impossible to assert that parties are categorically forbidden [28] Many of these parties plan to run candidates in the 1990 elections and, barring a drastic crackdown which is increasingly unlikely, the impact of resurgent multiple parties may demonstrate the inability of the Hungarian Socialist Party (the renamed ruling party) to continue its dominance much longer The real test will come in early 1990, when citizens will have an opportunity to choose between alternative programs of competing candidates

In both Poland and Hungary, well-organized, broad-based autonomous organizations now function as the government or a loyal opposition, and fully open multi-party elections are scheduled for the near future As we shall see below, the situation throughout the rest of the region is quite different, for political change has been far more convulsive and has lacked much of the gradual development over time of well-organized groups that represent political alternatives to the ruling communist parties

German Democratic Republic

Analysts have long held that of all the East European regimes, the German Democratic Republic was most willing and able to withstand opposition political initiatives either from within the party or from society In the midst of the the initial social upheaval and political turmoil of 1989, the aging, hardline Honecker leadership appeared to be in the strongest position to maintain its decision-making hegemony Yet, as regional events took a course of their own, the Socialist Unity Party (SED) was, in a matter of weeks, transformed from the dominant political force in society to a splintered, disintegrating institution in the wake of a massive upswelling of opposition

From May 1971 until October 1989 the Honecker regime had successfully resisted all attempts at fundamental political change from within,

as well as overt suggestions for liberalization from the Gorbachev administration While the scope of the events of 1989 was unprecedented, the coalescence of initiatives for reform was not entirely unpredictable

After taking power from Walter Ulbricht in 1971, the Honecker leadership was subjected to a variety of social, economic, and political strains, which analysts tended to downplay while emphasizing the successes of the GDR economy What was unique about the pressures faced by East Germany, was the increased influence exercised by the Federal Republic of Germany as a result of the opening up of travel and the impact of the media As the detente of the 1970s drew East and West closer economically, the two German states concluded a whole series of agreements, the most important of which was the Basic Treaty of December 1972 [29] These agreements meant recognition of the East German state by the Federal Republic, but they also opened up East Germany to influences from the West The implication for the GDR was increased economic, political, and cultural penetration by its economically more powerful and politically more legitimate neighbor The majority of East German citizens received both East and West German radio and television programs and have generally been better informed than most of their Eastern bloc neighbors [30]

For example, the Western media ensured that the GDR had an alternative source of information about the Polish events of 1980-81 As the PUWP acknowledged the workers right to strike and to form independent trade unions, as well as to question the principles of democratic centralism, the SED tried to exploit anti-Polish sentiments Despite this effort, the GDR did experience clashes between young demonstrators and the police, as well as minor strikes and protests in support of Solidarity [31]

Moreover, already by the mid-1970s the vaunted East German economy was running into problems Where economic reports for the first half of the decade had showed healthy annual growth rates, dramatic price increases for the energy supplies imported from the USSR were apparent by 1975 The targets for growth in the national economy, set in the five-year plan for 1976-80, were not achieved, and living standards failed to rise in line with popular expectations Analysts noted the potentially troubling implications of the SEDs being unable to justify this aspect of the GDR social contract, whereby the party guaranteed the people a secure existence and rising standard of living in return for political acquiescence [32]

While the potential for discontent and opposition was fueled by these developments, the SED made good use of its restrictive provisions, such as its ability to restrict freedom of assembly, expression, and press in accordance with the basic principles of the constitution In practice this meant the option of condemning, as unconstitutional, any individual or group activity of which it disapproved and taking legal action against East German citizens

who grouped together to demand that their constitutional rights be observed[33] Elections to the East German parliament, the Volkskammer, were designed to limit the voters choice to candidates selected by the National Front, which embraced all accepted parties and mass organizations and which accepted the leading role of the SED Party resolutions were binding on all political groups in the GDR, the presence of party representatives as watchdogs at all levels of the state, and mass organizations also helped to ensure that party resolutions were put into practice While criticism and self-criticism within the party was encouraged officially, it was by and large manipulated to reaffirm the leading role of the Communist Party under Honecker[34]

Against the backdrop of rigid centralization from above and increased influence of the outside political environment, a minor wave of extra-party opposition developed in the early 1980s, spearheaded by dissident intellectuals and an unofficial peace movement under the auspices of the Evangelical (Lutheran) Church Internal criticism of the GDR by such notable figures as Robert Havermann, Rudolf Bahro, and Stefan Heym drew attention to the confrontation of East German society with a state apparatus which determined what would be produced and how it would be allocated There was by no means consensus among this opposition, for example, arguments diverged concerning the issue of the Prague Spring of 1968—did it represent an adequate model for reform, or should it have gone further than it did[35]

Far more important was the organization by 1982-83, of a network of autonomous peace groups that was the largest in Eastern Europe and capable of turning out large numbers of citizens for events organized independently of the state The development was in large part stimulated by the presence of a mass disarmament movement in the FRG, and by what was perceived as the increased militarization of East German society Under protection of the Evangelical Church, the peace movement spread throughout the country and engaged in opposition activity in spite of state pressure and coercion During 1982 and 1983 organized protests, meetings, petition campaigns, etc , became commonplace In February 1982, the Dresden Peace Forum drew some 5,000 activists to its first demonstration, while other protests spread to Weimar, Potsdam, Leipzig, and Berlin the next year[36] In 1983 authorities cracked down on the thriving peace community in Jena, deporting most of its members[37] While some anti-nuclear activity continued, particularly through the Evangelical Church, a further crackdown in 1988 forced many more activists to emigrate

Scarcely one year later the GDR would undergo the greatest social upheaval in its postwar history, as massive citizen protests led to the dissolution of the SED-dictatorship in a matter of weeks—a pattern which would be repeated in Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia The dizzying pace of

events took analysts by surprise[38] Yet the crackdown on dissident groups in 1988 precipitated a steady buildup in social tension, rather than constraining it In the local elections of 7 May, for example, peace activists and human rights groups reemerged to monitor vote counting, while organizing protests against the electoral system in Leipzig, which would become the hotbed of the 1989 opposition activity[39] More significantly, throughout the country a rapid increase in public dissatisfaction was registered in an all-time non-voting low of 17 percent[40] At the same time, more and more petitions were being sent to the Honecker leadership by citizens previously unconnected with opposition activism[41]

The catalyst for the next phase of the opposition reform movement was the beginning of the mass emigration during the summer of 1989, which further indicated the SED s resistance to both economic and political reform Despite continued harassment of newly forming opposition groups and party reformists like Dresden party leader Hans Modrow, the opposition began to broaden its appeal and organize a nation-wide network By September, an umbrella organization calling itself the New Forum had been established that tried unsuccessfully to obtain recognition as an independent political party[42]

Throughout October an escalating systemic crisis was aggravated by several key developments 1) a rapidly growing and increasingly effective opposition network throughout the country, 2) an increased level of social tension as demonstrators and police fought in the streets, and 3) a deteriorating economy made worse by the exodus of an estimated 200,000 people, many of whom were skilled workers The number and size of the opposition groups swelled to encompass a broad spectrum of society, thus approaching the level of coalescence that occurred in Poland during the late 1960s and early 1970s By mid-October, Honecker was forced to resign by the Politburo amid rumors of an impending police massacre of citizens Under the leadership of new party chief Egon Krenz, the emphasis on reform shifted from when to how The ability of the SED to assuage the restive population depended crucially on how much power Krenz would surrender to genuine political reformers at regional and district levels

Mass resignations from the SED of both leaders (including Krenz, who was replaced by Gregor Gysi) and rank-and-file members, coupled with the appointment of Hans Modrow to be the prime minister in December, smoothed the way for discussion of real reforms, although they did not halt the party s dwindling membership[43] What was especially interesting was the level of reform sentiment within the party, as Krenz misjudged the mood of the SED district committees and the rank and file More troubling was an opinion poll which found that the SED would get only nine percent of the vote in the free elections promised for spring 1990—implying that half the SED s 2 2 million members (or ex-members) would vote for another party[44]

While the embattled coalition government in Berlin faced growing demands for radical reforms in the political sphere (including reunification with the Federal Republic), the format for economic reform began to emerge which would include decentralization of decision-making, price reform, the restructuring of the huge combines into more competitive smaller enterprises, the welcoming of Western capital and joint ventures, and the introduction of market forces [45] The new electoral law and the holding of multiparty elections as soon as possible will undoubtedly entail major structural changes in the GDR s political system Meanwhile, in the short term, the GDR must deal with the possibility of a splintering political system in which no effective political organization emerges to take control in the wake of the collapse of the dictatorship of the communist party

Czechoslovakia

In Eastern Europe s second major hardline state, where the greatest increase in independent activity was registered in the fall of 1989, the 1968 experience stands as a clear watershed in postwar experiments with economic and political pluralism In the spring of 1968, there occurred a veritable awakening of mass associations, interest groups and non-communist political parties as official organizations disintegrated or divided into new autonomous organizations Pluralist Socialism became the byword of the Czechoslovak People s Party, the Czech Socialist Party, and the National Front, all of which advocated giving citizens real choice between different political forces "[46]

The general consensus among communist party intellectuals of the desirability of a limited pluralism confined within the framework of the party s leading position was initially regarded as a better way to achieve democratization than more radical proposals Radical opinion won out by March 1968, however, as social groups outside the circle of intellectuals exerted greater influence What began as latent tensions gradually led to a powerful coalition of social forces interested in extreme change in the bureaucratic-egalitarian order, which culminated in a radical political outburst of social and cultural crises

As in East Germany, however, the impetus for reform in 1968, as well as in 1988, came from the intellectual sector of society As indicators of economic growth declined markedly in the years preceding the 1968 crisis, the regime began to rely increasingly on the advice of economists both inside and outside the party apparatus [47] Yet, at the same time, the short-lived Dubcek regime made every effort to channel and control mass energy within the leading role of the Communist Party [48]

With the Warsaw Pact invasion and the enunciation of the Brezhnev Doctrine, a number of analysts posited the near total erasure of all vestiges of a pluralist political culture in Czechoslovakia [49] Moreover, the dominant national political-cultural orientation of the great majority of the Czechoslovak people was, as late as 1989, hypothesized to be a participatory-subject culture, where ordinary citizens must be obedient to their rulers demands and must also comply with their instructions [50] While reformist elements within and outside the party were subject to purges, harassment, and trials through the mid-1970s, the nexus of opposition, the intellectual sector, remained active While given little more than periodic passing attention, their survival and activity proved crucial to the rapid turn of events in November-December 1989, as they had proved to be in 1967-68

While still in the process of shelving the Dubcek leadership s economic and political reforms one by one, the Husak regime, throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, was faced once again with the same economic problems that first provoked systematic reexamination of the centralist model an outdated and inflexible economic structure, declining efficiency of investment, acute tensions in supplies of raw materials and labor and their inefficient use, an increasingly alarming technological lag, and chronic problems in foreign trade [51] The reticence that the leadership showed in addressing this situation was paralleled in other areas as well Czechoslovakia achieved the dubious honor of being the northern European country worst hit by catastrophic environmental problems As a result of heavy and inefficient use of cheap brown coal in industry and energy production, by 1983 some 25 percent of all forests were dead or dying, and one third of all watercourses were too polluted for industrial use [52]

In response to this series of systemic crises, the first serious organized societal initiative, Charter 77, was formed in 1977 at the behest of 240 intellectuals The dissident group suffered from high member turnover rates, and its repeated attempts to organize national opposition networks were largely unsuccessful Yet several leading members of Charter 77, such as the playwright Vaclav Havel, would play a vital role in the 1989 events Throughout the long Husak tenure, the group spawned a wealth of cultural, publishing, human rights, peace, and ecological activities in addition to an impressive array of documentation on these issues [53] With regard to peace and environmental issues, the group established ties with movements in other Eastern European countries during the mid-1980s [54]

As the aging Husak leadership grew increasingly unable and unwilling to address fundamental economic and social problems, and to suppress thoroughly the growing opposition, a third source of pressure came from without in the form of Soviet leader Gorbachev s glasnost and perestroika strategies Even before the crucial 27th Soviet Party Congress in 1986,

Czechoslovak leaders had expressed their concerns about the turn of events in Moscow Presidium leader Vasil Bil ak warned of disrupting the system of political power of the working people and reiterated the correctness of the 1968 Soviet invasion and subsequent purge of the party [55]

Yet, in the midst of an increasingly tense social climate, signs emerged of differences within the leadership concerning the way to move into the Gorbachev Era and deal with the growing opposition Premier Lubomir Strougal in 1987 praised Gorbachev s frank and innovative approach to all issues and claimed, in contrast with Bil ak, that the 1968 reforms had contained a number of correct and valuable elements [56] For his part, Gorbachev reaffirmed the theme that would, in 1989, lead to the public repudiation of the Brezhnev Doctrine and to the assertion that each Eastern European party be responsive to its own people, and the right to decide in a sovereign manner how each country should develop [57]

Thus, a situation similar to that of 1967-68 took a significantly different turn, as it became increasingly clear to the Husak leadership, and then to that of his successor Milos Jakes, that it was more or less on its own and could not count on direct Soviet support Taking advantage of this changed climate, new opposition groups (like the Initiative for Social Defence, the Thomas G Masaryk Association, and an incipient umbrella organization, the Democratic Initiative) joined Charter 77 in pressing the reform process [58] For its part, the government grew increasingly schizophrenic, internal reports of the CCP in May 1988 praised Charter 77 and other groups for providing a forum for youth, while simultaneously, the government cracked down on their meetings and forced the Democratic Initiative to suspend its activities for several months [59]

Throughout the spring and summer of 1988, however, the situation intensified to the point where, despite the government s periodic hardline tactics, the number of demonstrations, protests and new groups seeking recognition continued to rise dramatically To make matters worse from the point of the regime, in the wake of several large demonstrations in Prague in October, CPSU Politburo member Alexander Iakovlev visited the country and lectured Czechoslovak party officials on the need for a plurality of views [60] By early 1989 it had become clear that divisions now existed in the leadership over the issue of reform On 25 January, Presidium member Jan Fojtik warned that the public influence of opposition groups was increasing at a rate to which the government could not respond, while reform had lagged substantially [61]

By November, Czechoslovakia was in a new phase of reform, the most extensive since 1968 The impact of developments in Poland in the spring and in the GDR by late summer, contributed to the growth of autonomous political activity and the growing demands for reform Similar to the

Honecker regime, the Jakes administration proved to be unable to cope with opposition that had grown nation-wide and with internal divisions that resulted in a clear lack of direction In a matter of weeks, the opposition s emphasis shifted from applying pressure to a hardline government that was brutally cracking down on demonstrators in late November, to debating the relative merits of Alexander Dubcek and Vaclav Havel for the presidency By early 1990, the long-time dissident Havel had been elected president, while Dubcek, the former party leader, was selected as leader in the revitalized parliament

As occurred in East Germany, an ideologically rigid regime proved unable to withstand the combined impact of declining economic and political performance, rising opposition and pressure, and lack of support from the Soviet political leadership Yet the opposition that had emerged to challenge the dominant role of the communist party was not as effectively organized as that in Poland

Bulgaria

While the Western media s attention was riveted to events in Poland, Hungary, the GDR and Czechoslovakia in the fall of 1989, fundamental change was transpiring in Bulgaria that largely went unnoticed Yet the historical affinity of this Balkan nation for Russia and the Soviet Union would have a major impact on the emergence of political pluralism at the decade s end The initial statements and slogans of glasnost which emanated from the USSR in 1987-88 and emphasized a cautious path to democratization, were echoed in the Bulgarian media in 1988-89 While the aging Zhivkov leadership continued to maintain a tight rein on the domestic political environment, extensive debate developed quickly on freedom of the press, artistic creativity, and the establishment of parallel associations in the political arena [62]

Yet, as in the Soviet Union, the Bulgarian leadership s initial lip-service to the idea of glasnost opened the window for a range of autonomous reform initiatives from society An environmental movement emerged to protest the catastrophic pollution of the town of Ruse by a caustic soda works on the Danube Activists from the Citizens Committee for the Ecological Defense of Ruse initiated a series of demonstrations and petition campaigns which led to the plant s eventual closing, as well as to the expulsion of its activities from the Communist Party [63] Despite the crackdown on the group, it was perhaps one of the first times that Bulgarian citizens outside the framework of officialdom had affected a policy decision

Until Zhivkov s sudden resignation in November 1989, the pattern of autonomous reform initiatives and the regime s response to them differed little from that of the hardline regimes of Czechoslovakia and the GDR

Throughout the fall of 1988 and the spring of 1989, numerous independent groups of several hundred members each, surfaced across the country, each with an issue to press on a recalcitrant leadership One of the first, the Independent Club for the Support of Perestroika and Glasnost, initiated a broad range of proposals which addressed living standards, ecology, demographic problems, culture and science while openly remaining unofficial to avoid outside patronage and manipulation [64]

Authorities responded to the actions of the Club in much the same manner that characterized their treatment of other organizations, they harassed, arrested, and expelled activists, but stopped short of attempting to eradicate it This produced speculation that Bulgaria s leaders were becoming responsive to citizens feelings [65] From February through May of 1989, the Zhivkov regime adopted the carrot-and-stick approach of cooptation and crackdown The government s policy of legal registration for associations was aimed at controlling groups, despite the fact that prominent legal experts pointed out that the existing Bulgarian legal code did not require groups to seek an official registration [66]

While groups such as the Ruse Committee, the Discussion Club, and the various Green parties were subjected to harassment, the intensive persecution was reserved from groups presumed or claiming to have ties to the country s Turkish minority, such as the Independent Human Rights Association A national policy of forced assimilation of the large minority evolved into a virtual pogrom, as ethnic Turks were attacked and driven out of the country by the thousands Ethnic Turks and their few non-Muslim sympathizers initiated a series of hunger strikes and organized large demonstrations which were met with severe police repression The Turkish Question became the focus for the regime s non-negotiable demands vis-à-vis the populace, and organizations pressing for reform in this area were treated far more harshly than their peers whose demands the authorities could more easily accommodate [67]

By November 1989, a fundamentally new and curious situation had developed, further illustrating the difficulties of Eastern European leaders in coopting autonomous opposition groups Opposition groups, spearheaded by the Discussion Club, launched a series of actions through the fall, calling for fundamental political reform The regime s alarmed and haphazard response revealed clear divisions within the leadership, with some Central Committee members, and at least one Politburo member loosely allied with the Discussion Club [68] This de facto alliance was instrumental in the November 10 coup which ousted Zhivkov from office following his open reluctance to adopt fundamental changes in the political process

The resultant palace coup and the housecleaning of the communist party that followed, paved the way for an explosion of independent

associations, trade unions, and political parties by January 1990 While the reformist communist leaders gradually gave way, in the face of escalating public demands, they committed a serious political error in mid-January by calling for an end to anti-Turkish policy—evidence of the negative side of the emergence of political pluralism

Romania

In Nicolae Ceausescu s Romania, the reform process began with a whimper and ended with the loudest explosion in the Eastern bloc since 1956 Yet, even in this most highly centralized East European state, societal opposition managed to survive in the face of heavy persecution In 1977, the government had been shaken by worker unrest in the Brasov region, which it met with force The Gorbachev era touched all of Eastern Europe and, in the end, not even Romania was immune to the forces that were released There had been attempts at an organized opposition in 1985, as activists met clandestinely to discuss the possibility of resurrecting the old pre-war political parties [69] Such attempts continued until the December revolution of 1989, and were routinely suppressed

By 1987, a handful of other opposition groups had emerged in Romania such as the National Peasant Party and the Romanian Association for the Defense of Human Rights These groups focused on promoting public awareness of and the authorities compliance with the provisions on human, civil, and political rights contained in Romania s constitution and in the Helsinki Accords [70] While the groups pledged themselves to non-violence and to dialogue with the authorities, they also released documents purporting to reveal the feudalization of the country under Ceausescu s rule As a result, crackdowns in 1987 on such groups silenced them for awhile, as leaders were arrested, beaten, and fined

Workers in the Brasov region were the next to press the government for reforms in 1987 and 1988 In November 1987, they initiated street demonstrations and strikes over cuts in salaries, the continuing decline in living standards, and Ceausescu s policy of razing roughly half of the country s villages [71] The authorities responded by arresting leaders and cracking down on the workers with tanks and tear gas In the summer of 1988, an embryonic independent trade union, the Zarnesti Arms Factory Group, leaked evidence to the West that unrest was again building in this weakest point in Ceausescu s kingdom [72] In June, union activists disseminated manifestos in Brasov factories protesting living conditions and were promptly arrested and beaten by Sucuritate officers Activists attempting to resurrect another independent trade union, Freedom, met a similar fate in Cluj that summer [73]

As in Bulgaria, however, proponents of reform were not confined to isolated groups in society and by the spring of 1989, there were clear signals that the Romanian leadership was not a unanimous body At the beginning of March, six former top figures in the Romanian Communist Party addressed an open letter to Ceausescu, which turned into a scathing indictment of the regime s policies and an alternative platform for the establishment of a decent social life in Romania [74] At the same time more and more party veterans, particularly journalists, came under suspicion for treason, and many were arrested, as divisions within the party became impossible to conceal Criticism by Romanian intellectuals at home and in exile also increased markedly, as letter after letter reached the West condemning the stifling political atmosphere in the country and as thousands of Romanian citizens, including a growing number of ethnic Romanians, fled into exile [75]

While opposition grew steadily in the Soviet bloc s last Stalinist holdout, the regime adopted increasingly harsh means of quelling it In the second week of December, the rolling revolution that had toppled regimes in the GDR, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria, came to Romania in the form of large-scale demonstrations in the western city of Timosoara Protests which began after the police removed a popular Hungarian clergyman, were met by a bloody reprisal by Securitate forces which left as many as several thousand dead Rather than receding, opposition to the regime escalated and became increasingly violent with protests, strikes, and demonstrations spreading to the capital and other cities In his last public appearance before a public rally on 21 December, Ceausescu was shouted down by the crowd and forced to flee the Presidential Palace, as the armed forces sided with the demonstrators at the critical moment

The resultant stunning turn of events left the country in a state of virtual civil war, as regular army units battled Securitate forces in the streets Ceausescu and his wife Elena were captured, tried in secret and executed in a matter of days The regime that could least accommodate autonomous initiatives for change was brought down most violently by them

Conclusions

It is by no means clear at the beginning of 1990 where events in Eastern Europe will lead, for the revolutionary transformations discussed above are still in process and their outcomes are not predetermined [76] It is most likely that the processes of change will result in the emergence of political-economic systems throughout the region that are not homogeneous In the political realm it is conceivable that in some countries, stable, pluralist political systems will emerge, while in others the response to political fragmentation and semi-anarchy may result in the reimposition of some form of

authoritarian political controls In the economic realm, mixed economies that combine elements of traditional state socialism with market factors will probably result, but the mix may well differ substantially from country to country Moreover, the degree to which new regimes will be able to resolve the fundamental economic and ecological problems which they have inherited, will probably differ as well and will likely depend on the degree to which they are able to be integrated into the Western economy [77]

Though it is not possible at this point to predict with any degree of confidence the contours of a post-communist Eastern Europe, one can assert that state socialism, as it has existed in the region for more than four decades, will not be reinstated, that local communist parties will, at best, play but a supportive role in the political and economic reconstruction of the region, and that the dominance of the USSR over the Eastern European systems will be dramatically reduced, if not fully broken

Several important points emerge from the current analysis First of all, the process of revolutionary change that has occurred in all six of the Soviet-oriented communist states is interconnected and has common roots Those roots can be found in the fact that throughout the entire region, even in Romania and Czechoslovakia, emerging social groups placed increasingly greater demands for participation on the communist elites who dominated the systems At the same time, the internal contradictions of the Stalinist socio-economic-political model, with its inability to adjust easily to external demands and its virtual ignoring of the costs of industrial production, reached crisis dimensions in most countries Authoritarian elites were no longer able to suppress these groups nor to ignore their demands, with the result that during the last months of 1989, they were displaced

Not only did the revolutions of 1989 have similar origins, but they were also influenced by the dramatic changes in Soviet policy toward the region and by the demonstration effect of developments elsewhere in the region In many ways, Gorbachev s repeated statements that Eastern Europeans should determine their own fate and that the Soviet Union would not intervene to undermine the process of long-needed political reform contributed to the radical political changes [78] This hands off' approach to the process of political challenges to the ruling party elites in Eastern Europe—in fact, Gorbachev openly advocated political reform in some countries—contributed to the environment that permitted, even encouraged, those advocating political change to press forward their demands more openly The fact that Polish Solidarity was successful in challenging Communist Party domination, winning an election, and taking over political power—all without Soviet intervention—apparently exercised a powerful influence elsewhere in Eastern Europe

To a great degree, therefore, the dramatic changes that have occurred throughout Eastern Europe find their basis in both internal factors (economic crises and growing pressures for political participation) and the external environment (the shifts in declared Soviet policy and the evidence of reformers success elsewhere, as in Poland)

Despite the similarities in the reform process throughout Eastern Europe, substantial differences exist as well Perhaps the most important is the degree to which alternative political forces had been able to organize prior to the developments of 1989 and, thus, the degree to which they represent a viable political alternative to the communists In Poland, for example, Solidarity, which has a decade of organizing experience, has been able—at least to this point—to coalesce to the point where it has formed a government, passed legislation, and implemented policy Moreover, the Polish communists have virtually disappeared as a viable political force In other countries, such as Bulgaria and the GDR, the communists have yet to give up effective power, and the opposition has splintered into a multiplicity of competing factions Whether these opposition groups will be able to unite adequately to win in open elections scheduled for most countries in spring 1990, or to form viable ruling coalitions, is a key question Thus, differences exist throughout the region concerning both the remaining organized strength of the communists and the ability of the opposition to organize effectively and win a working majority in competitive elections

A related problem, most evident already in Poland, is the need for a reform government to rely on a communist bureaucracy to carry out its policy decisions Will the members of that bureaucracy, long accustomed to the perquisites associated with the communist party elite, function as a non-political civil service willing to carry out policies that diverge strongly from those of the past and will the new regimes be able to train a new non-communist civil service?

Yet another issue concerns the willingness of populations long repressed and long deprived of material goods to have the patience to accept the austerity programs that will be necessary virtually everywhere in order to turn around moribund economies—assuming, of course, that the new leaderships will be able to agree on programs of economic reform, successfully implement them, and then reap positive results

As argued at the very beginning of this essay, events in Eastern Europe since mid-1989 are revolutionary in nature In terms of structural changes of the state socialist system, they have already gone far beyond anything envisaged in Gorbachev s reform program for the USSR Gorbachev has been committed to retaining communist party dominance, while expanding political liberties, and to making an essentially state socialist economic system more efficient and more responsive to public needs The Eastern Europeans,

however, have moved much beyond those positions The new Polish government is already in the process of dismantling portions of the economic infrastructure of the old centralized system, everywhere throughout the region, coalition governments are now in place, party militias, used in part to help enforce party dominance, are being dismantled, and open multiparty elections are scheduled for spring 1990 which will no doubt result in the overwhelming defeat of the communists [79]

Eastern Europe has entered a new era, the contours of which are by no means clear Though other factors have been important, as we have attempted to document, key to the developments that have led to the revolutionary changes that have already occurred and will continue to develop, has been the emergence, within the framework of centralized and authoritarian political systems, of autonomous groups It has been these groups which have challenged the ruling communist elites and forced them, in varying degrees to this point, to respond to their political demands and to share political power

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Country	Date	Type of Election	Major Contestants
Hungary	25 March 1990	parliament which will elect a president	Hungarian Socialist Party (communists) and several opposing groups, including Hung, Democratic Forum and Alliance of Free Democrats
Poland	mid-April 1990	local and regional governments	Communists, Solidarity, and other smaller parties
Romania	April 1990*	parliament	Council of National Salvation (ruling group) and various new parties
GDR	18 March 1990**	parliament	Communists, four parties formerly allied with communists, six opposition groups, and New Forum
Bulgaria	late June 1990*	parliament	Communists and Union of Democratic Forces (includes several prewar parties)
Czechoslovakia	June 1990	parliament which will elect president	Communists, Civic Forum Public Against Violence, and many new parties

* In both Romania and Bulgaria opposition parties are calling for delays that will give them more time to organize

** In the GDR the elections were pushed back from May at the demand of the opposition

Source *The New York Times* 21 January 1990 p 4 1