

5-1989

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THE LIMITS TO CHANGE IN EAST EUROPE

By

Elesha Kay Fetrow

What does every European need today? "Provided peace and security are guaranteed, every European seeks to live in an open and prosperous society, in a society striving to put an end to injustice and capable of offering every individual the opportunity of making the most of his or her abilities while serving universal human ideals."¹

The world today is and extremely complex place. No longer x
is it set up as a series of independent nation-states. The world has been transformed into an all encompassing network of nations that rely on one another; nations have become interdependent. There are areas, such as the EEC, that are tied economically. There are areas, such as ASIAN that are linked, more or less socially. There are areas with definite political ties, ties which are historical and those which were established to provide for community defense.

It is the above types of linkages which will be examined in the following study, specifically the study will focus on the relationship between the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc nations. An examination will be made of the effects of Glasnost and Perestroika on the social, economic and political ties which hold the area together.

Typically, the Eastern Bloc nations, are thought of (by the West) as being dependent on and of obtaining their directives from the Soviet Union. However, by the very premise of Perestroika (restructure) those long standing notions could be altered. How far will the Eastern Bloc nations go? Is it possible for them to depart from the shadow of the Soviet Union?

Even more important, is it possible for them to behave more autonomously, to follow their own political, social and economic objectives? Should they? In order to evaluate the above questions, the countries of Hungary and Czechoslovakia have been chosen in order to obtain a broad spectrum for measurement. Both nations have experienced their own form of struggle. In Hungary, that struggle has continued despite Soviet opposition. In Czechoslovakia, opposition to Soviet dominance was crushed and little remained of Czech liberalizations afterward. It is only recently that signs of a Czechoslovak thaw can be witnessed. "Ironically, in traditionally heretic Prague, Gorbachev's fresh ideas are still fiercely resisted."²

After World War II ended, nations of the world found themselves in a unique situation. Gone were the days of National unilateral action. In its place, a system of bi-polarity quickly emerged. The main actors, the Soviet Union and the United States, began to split up the world between them. The Cold War had begun and a 'if you are not with us then you must be with them' type attitude directed national policy actions. In order to understand the effects of Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of Glasnost and Perestroika on Eastern Europe, it is essential to first establish the background for those policies.

The Cold War was a time of international political limbo. The Soviet Union was thought, by the United States, as being aggressive, at the close of World War II. The Soviet Union viewed the U.S. unilateral reconstruction of Germany as

threatening. Each nation reacted to moves of the other. Less communication and trust was exhibited. Military organizations were formed. Economic and political organizations were also formed, with the express purpose of keeping the other side out. The United States formulated the containment policy in order to disassociate itself and U.S. allies from being effected by the 'evils' of socialism. The Soviet Union believed that it was being encircled by hostile capitalist nations that wished to destroy the Soviet system. Relations grew more hostile, and as they grew more hostile attempts were made by both sides to define ^hwhere influence could and ought to be maintained.

An example of Soviet reaction to Western policies was the establishment of the Warsaw Pact, 1955.³ The Warsaw Pact, like ^{ATO}Nato, though supposedly a military defense alliance to protect and benefit all of the members, was transformed into a political tool. It soon became evident that though member countries were to be a part of the system, in actuality, it meant that Eastern Europe would be dominated by the Soviet Union. It was soon obvious that Eastern European leaders were not going to be allowed to operate autonomously. Instead, it was clearly evident that the function of the Warsaw Pact was that of a vast police force deployed to safeguard the power of the imperial regime; the Soviet Union. Threats to the "leading role of the party" and "membership in the Warsaw Pact", brought about an inevitable demonstration of Soviet force.⁴

In 1948 the Soviets backed a coup organized by Soviet and

Czechoslovak Communist parties and established a socialist government in Czechoslovakia. In 1953, signs of East German discontent could be detected. In 1956, the Hungary Revolution presented the Soviet rulers with the first serious challenge to their hegemony in Eastern Europe. The result, the Red Army invaded Hungary and ended the mass protests with blood.⁵ In 1961, the Berlin Wall was built, by the Soviets, to stop the flood of refugees from East to West Germany.⁶ And perhaps the most notable episode occurred in 1968, the year of the Prague Spring.

The Prague Spring (1968), though now viewed as the forerunner of Glasnost and Perestroika, was a crisis for Soviet leaders. The socialist Czechoslovak leadership, headed by Alexander Dubcek, was working towards reform within the governmental framework. Reforms ~~which~~ were designed to alleviate the economic problems and societal discontent that Czechoslovakia had been experiencing. The reforms promoted individual and societal freedoms and were committed to political liberalization and economic reforms, ideas which were contrary to the Soviet norm. A major problem arose. The Soviets were feeling their hold on Eastern Europe slipping which meant that the real risk was, if allowed to continue, Czechoslovakia might "infect the bloc with the ferment of reform and reorientation."⁷ At that time, dissention in the 'ranks' was not to be tolerated, and the Soviet Union with Warsaw Pact troops, once again invaded Czechoslovakia and eventually placed pro-Soviet men in the

government. The sad part of the situation is that Czechoslovak leaders believed that they had been acting in accordance to genuine socialist principles.⁸

In order to explain why one socialist nation had been subject to a socialist invasion, the Brezhnev Doctrine was born. The document attempted to reconcile the contradictions of a free socialist state and the limits that the Soviet Union was placing on that freedom. In actuality, the Doctrine "amounts to denying in principle the sovereignty of any "socialist" country accessible to the Soviet Union."⁹ And it was a blunt assertion of the region-wide right to intervene.¹⁰ ^{The} An intervention which is currently attributed to the fact that in Czechoslovakia, as elsewhere in East Europe, reforms were proceeding too rapidly for the Soviets. Reforms internally and externally which threatened or even directly questioned the supremacy of socialism and Moscow, have warranted such Soviet action in the past.

The Soviet Union had deliberately grabbed its portion of the world and held it tightly, stepping into the age of power politics. To most of the communist parties around the world "the Brezhnev Doctrine symbolized the beginning of a period when Moscow would not abide by Marxist-Leninism in any consistent way, only to use it, or twist it, in an attempt to impart seemingly noble motives to its increasingly cynical actions."¹¹

"....What is the difference between the reform program of Mikhail S. Gorbachev and that of Alexander Dubcek in Czechoslovakia in 1968? Answer--Nothing but Gorbachev doesn't know it yet."¹²

East European Joke

Over the past few years, the Western notion of the Soviet Union as the 'Evil Empire,' has been dissolving. The idea that the Soviet Union is mainly a manipulative, un-feeling, power-hungry nation, has been fading away. Credit for such a 'historic' change can mainly be attributed to one man, Mikhail Gorbachev, the General Secretary of the Soviet Union as of March 1985.

Mr. Gorbachev has had a definite impact on the changes taking place within as well as perceptions without the Soviet Union. His goal, a radical transformation of the economic mechanism by the early 1990's in his country, is a task in itself.¹³ He is also emphasizing the need for the freeing of information, increasing the responsibility of society in society and the development and application of new technologies.

As Gorbachev views it, his plan is not radical. The plan is simply a return to fundamental Marxist-Leninist principles such as democratic centralism.¹⁴ But why return? Simple, the Soviet Union, increasingly, over the past few years has found itself falling behind in technology coupled with a sluggish economy. Gorbachev believes that the old policies, those used by his predecessors, can no longer change the world [the Soviet Union] for the better."¹⁵ In order to remain politically 'on top' something needed to be done. And as Marxist philosophy dictates, change must be made with the economy-the superstructure.¹⁶

Gorbachev has dedicated himself to the restructuring of the Soviet economy. But to catalyze the change, to get society to

have a stake in the changes, Gorbachev introduced the policy of Glasnost (openness) to supplement his economic changes. "[We need to] wake up those people who have fallen asleep." "To get individuals involved in all stages, is the most important aspect of what we are doing."¹⁷ According to Gorbachev, the citizens are to wake up and have a positive impact on the economy through their own inputs and their criticism. The idea is to open the channels of communication within society, allowing certain sectors to have more input into the system. Gorbachev, even promoted (though as yet limited) the concept of elections within the party itself. To unite socialism with democracy has been a major theme which has threaded its way through many of Gorbachev's speeches and publications.

Interestingly, Soviet liberalization at home, as was suggested by the Eastern European joke above, has been following similar approaches to those taken in Hungary 1956, and in Czechoslovakia 1968. If that is so, then it should be re-emphasized that those liberalizing movements were stopped and if history were to repeat itself, one could conclude that new liberalizations would also be stopped. A wait and see type attitude is the consensus of East European leaders. They want to be sure that Gorbachev is earnest and ^{just} if he is successful, before ^x putting themselves completely on the line. East European leaders fear the return of Soviet direct domination and brutality,

Therefore, East Europe waits. But pressures in their own countries are building up ~~pressure~~; pressures which can be

attributed directly to how East Europe has been structured-Soviet style. East European leaders have inherited economic structures that have not been developing spontaneously, but have been developed on the basis of theoretical concepts and plans which originated from Moscow.¹⁸ Serious economic and social problems have been the result, and they must be dealt with in Eastern Europe soon.

Hungary, perhaps the most progressive of its East European neighbors, claims to have begun to enjoy the effects of Soviet glasnost. It appears that glasnost in the Soviet Union has made it easier for Hungary to make changes, changes that otherwise could not have been accomplished. Regardless of the reasons, the process of change has begun.

Janos Kadar, in the spring of 1988, began the process of loosening the economic and political controls, which he says was designed to "make the people happier."¹⁹ However, more changes are still necessary. How necessary? Hungary today has the largest per capita foreign debt in the socialist bloc. They have a trade deficit of .4 billion dollars.²⁰ Inflation has reached 17% and unemployment (in a socialist state) has reached 3.3% and is expected to go as high as 13% with new austerity measures.²¹ The problem, apart from economic mismanagement, is that "Hungarians want a great deal from abroad and they have virtually nothing to offer in exchange."²² The Hungarian people want desperately to improve their standard of living and most citizens have two jobs. But the Hungarian standard to be attained, as

compared to the rest of the socialist bloc, is based on Western European standards. The ^{at} standard ~~which~~ is higher than the rest of the bloc and causes more societal dissatisfaction with the system, which leads to more pressure to change being placed on the government.

Besides a marginal amount of societal liberalization, several reforms have been instigated in an attempt to get the economy moving again. Perhaps the two most original reforms for any socialist country^x can be found in the new Hungarian banking system and the Hungarian experimentation with a stock exchange.

Banking has taken on a new meaning. No longer is it possible for the government to obtain money for short-term, non-profitable venture, such as the governmental subsidization of primary consumer goods. Money now must make money. The money must now be used to turn a profit, and innovation and inventions are now being heavily invested in.²³ The position of the enterprise has also changed. Enterprises are now being allowed to go bankrupt rather than having banks being forced to bail the enterprise out.

The other reform, a direct experiment with capitalism, has been the creation of the Hungarian stock exchange. Though relatively new and its directors are still inexperienced, the operation seems to have been a success.²⁴

Perhaps, the most beneficial outcome of the reforms (and glasnost) in Hungary, has been the "new spirit of the people."²⁵ Independent trade unions have been formed, wild cat strikes have

been called²⁶ and as one author put it after a recent visit to Budapest, "I felt that I was in a more or less free country."²⁷

Society has begun to organize into new groups in order to place pressure on the government for change. The result has been the erosion of the monopolistic power that has been held by the communist party,²⁸ ⁶ A result which would not have been allowed under Brezhnev's leadership. Not only have groups been forming around economic issues, but society has produced a number of political groups as well. Hungarian pluralism seems to be returning.

The pressure for change has not strictly come from the people. Several government officials are pushing for more change as well. As one Hungarian Politburo member, Will Pozsgay, put it, "we want to show ourselves as a model, as a laboratory for changes."²⁹ The governmental leadership has even been changing to reflect such an attitude. Early last fall, Janos Kadar stepped down, so Grosz, a reform minded leader, could lead the way.

Changes are definitely taking place within the socialist bloc; however, not all socialist countries are so acclimated to change as Hungary. Czechoslovakia, though not wanting to be perceived as being behind the times, has been moving toward reform at a very cautious rate. Reports are that the country is still traumatized by the Soviet invasion that ended the 1968 Prague Spring. Furthermore, up until December 1987, Czechoslovakia was still presided over by the Brezhnev installed,

75 year old Gustav Husak-a man who has held tight control over Czechoslovakia for nearly 20 years. However, the new Czech leader, Milos Jakes, should be held suspect of moving towards actual reform since his political career has been noted for the "erasing of reform."³⁰

Following the go ahead given by Gorbachev, modest economic reforms have been made such as a loosening of excessive economic centralization. Enterprises are being allowed a little more leeway, "making them accountable, self-financing and self-managing."³¹ "Workers will be electing their management from among competing candidates and will help decide development strategies and distribution of profits."³² Such a policy closely parallels the reforms in the Soviet Union.

Social changes however, are moving even slower. Presently there is no plan for implementing any social changes. Pluralism is not to be permitted in any form. No force which would be against socialism will be allowed to exist. The national media, as of yet, has remained unchanged and boring.³³

Czechoslovakia presently has a staunch leadership which is unlikely to push reform but Czechoslovakia has an even larger obstacle to real reform. The economy is in such bad shape, that even if true liberalizing reforms were used terrible problems would occur. A dramatic drop in societal living standard and wages, inflation and unemployment would rise are but a few of the consequences of liberalization.³⁴ To give a dramatic example of the consequences of liberalization, it is calculated that if

central planning were dismantled, ~~that~~ 30% of the smokestack industries would have to be closed,³⁵ roughly the equivalent of 30% of U.S. steel production being closed. The impact would be immense on the economy and society.

As was stated previously, there was/is pressure being placed on socialist leaders for change throughout the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. In the Soviet Union, Gorbachev has proclaimed the old [Stalinist] model of the economy and society as ~~being~~ somewhat naive. Naive in the sense that the system overlooked too many aspects of social and economic realities.³⁶ These realities enable capitalist countries to become more advanced and prosperous, while socialist countries fell into economic stagnation and decay.

Changes are being implemented in order to take care of some of those problems. For instance, mass input into decision-making processes is being encouraged in the Soviet Union. Individuals are being allowed to speak their minds and criticize activities and plans that they deem as disagreeable. Economic policies are being implemented that should promote growth within the economy. However, though the changes seem to be headed in a positive direction, even positive changes can cause serious problems to arise in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe.

The dilemma for Gorbachev is that to gain any amount of progress he must allow certain freedoms to exist without those freedoms becoming detrimental to his purpose. For instance, in the past genuine economic and social changes of the system

induced an element to arise that was not viewed as positive.³⁷ With the increased acceptance of criticism, the state becomes subject to the extreme criticism of those that totally object to and are dissatisfied with the system as a whole; thus an element of pluralism has been created.

Another problem that Mr. Gorbachev is facing is an unstable economy. As yet, the economic changes that have been implemented have not caused a real measure of economic growth. Societal living standards have not been perceivably raised-societal dissatisfaction has been the outcome.

All of the social and economic problems that are felt within the Soviet Union, are being experienced to a greater degree in Eastern Europe and more. The Soviet Union has some rather obvious advantages over Eastern Europe in dealing with those problems. One advantage is the relatively large Soviet economy. This means that since the Soviet economy is so large, and has so many resources to draw from, that economic structural problems are not as obvious nor as easily felt by society as in Eastern Bloc countries. Furthermore, since the Soviet economy is so large, it is not dependent on trade from it's satellites. However, the satellite nations are extremely dependent on the Soviet Union for trade as well as economic assistance.

Socially, the same problems that are felt in the Soviet Union are felt by East European countries, except in most cases the problems are compounded. Pluralistic tendencies are even more obvious and more easily established within East Europe since

the nations are so much smaller and most of them have had recent experience with pluralistic tendencies.

The whole barrage of problems simply encourages the disunification of the area, so why does the area stay together? After all, Gorbachev has intimated that each country must exist under absolute independence, where each individual party (nation) has the sovereign right to decide its direction.³⁸ Does the area stay together simply out of habit? Or is there some type of regional integrity that is silently being upheld?

Though Soviet tanks, armies and other machines of war are still stationed throughout Eastern Europe and give some legitimizing support to the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, Gorbachev knows that some way other than force must be used if the area is to be maintained. Three Soviet influences contribute to the areas cohesiveness. First is that change is being promoted by Moscow, therefore any reforms within Eastern Europe are perceived as being due to example rather than by pressure.³⁹ Second, Gorbachev is promoting the idea of a more independent East Europe. This strategy not only gives credibility to Gorbachev's rhetoric but it quite tactfully allows the Soviet Union to suggest that the nations should also become more economically independent and should not be dependent on the Soviet Union to bail them out of economic problems. This policy would also, if effective, allow Soviet troops to be withdrawn from Eastern Europe—a practice that has become increasingly more expensive.⁴⁰ Third, Gorbachev influences East Europe through

consultation. Mr. Gorbachev on a regular basis consults with East European leaders in order to obtain their input into matters of joint concern. This policy allows socialist leaders to seem to have more autonomy and to feel that they have a stake in the outcome of a joint effort and ultimately remain supportive of Soviet policies.⁴¹

Within East European countries, most leaders still cater to the whims of the Soviets. In fact most still bless and fear the Soviet military presence that has been stationed throughout the area. Leaders bless the military presence since it lends an extra amount of legitimacy to their own governments. Yet they fear the military for the retaliatory memories that it still embodies.⁴² However, cautious as well as bold steps towards reform have been made by most East European leaders.

In all cases, the first phase towards any reform has been to obtain Soviet approval before making any radical changes. Approval must be obtained in order to prevent a repeat of Soviet direct intervention.⁴³ The second phase of reform is to coordinate reform goals to the normative (socialist) goals already held.⁴⁴

In order for the socialist countries to once again flourish economically and socially, a balance must be made. Socialist leaders must reconcile their own position within the political framework and the ideal which they embody with the means of reform which most deem necessary to promote progress.

For Hungary, the reconciliation process has proven quite

successful. Hungarian leaders have maintained a marginal amount of reform since the Soviet intervention of 1956. Thus, the transition to an even more reform minded society has been relatively easy. However, in Czechoslovakia the government still clings to the Brezhnev legacy of fear and coercion which has lingered on since 1968. Therefore, any reforms which are attempted are not wholeheartedly made by the government nor are they wholeheartedly supported by the society.

The relationship is simple, there remains a dominant nation, the Soviet Union, which promotes economic and political reforms within its own country and promotes reform in the Eastern bloc in order to advance Soviet goals. By promoting reform in Eastern Europe, Gorbachev gains two of his goals. Gorbachev obtains a positive world and national perception of himself as a true reformer. The second goal is drawing the Eastern bloc more closely under the direction of the Soviet Union and at the same time make the countries less dependent on the Soviet Union economically. That way Gorbachev gets to manipulate the area without paying all of the costs. The question is, how long can such a relationship exist? Once East Europe realizes that the costs of even more extensive and radical reform measures are not as expensive as they were in the past, will the bloc break?

Presently, Eastern Europe is a group of small, disorganized nations with similar backgrounds and mutual alliances, heavily influenced by the Soviet Union. What if that were to change? What if the nations were to organize, especially under the banner

promoted by Gorbachev (a philosophy which has a perceived goal of undermining the NATO alliance), a common European home? Such actions would surely enhance the situation of East European leaders. It would give them more latitude to maneuver and deal with their individual national situations. Furthermore, if collective organization could be achieved throughout Eastern Europe, ~~an~~ international balance would then be shifted away from Soviet domination of the area.

East European nations are beginning to realize that they are a part of a multilateral world, ^a world that included ^{the} interlinkages of economies and often times societies. They have begun to realize that in order for their own nations to survive, dependence cannot and should not be placed on the Soviet Union. They must act on their own behalf in their own self interests. This implies that if the trend continues, East Europe will in time begin to develop real autonomy. However, East Europe does not feel that it is ready to go it entirely alone. There is some pressure being placed on the West to fill the economic void which has been left by Moscow, pressure for the West to under-write the inefficient East European economic systems. If such is the case, several outcomes could occur. The Soviet Union, as in the past could interfere and once again forcefully claim the area. Or, if Western influences are to be allowed and Western money is to be used to support the East European governments, then certain changes are inevitable. Europe will more likely become a common home to all of its countries, and as such the area will likely

become more homogenous in its make-up. East European attributes will likely be transferred onto Western Europe, but it is more likely that Eastern Europe will incorporate more West qualities.

There are many issues which are encompassed in the principle of East European reform, several of which have been included above, but there is more. There are many possible outcomes for East Europe, the problem is in finding the correct set of inputs to formulate the "optimal" outcome. So far East Europe seems to have been given the go ahead for making major changes in their established economic and social structures, but they move slowly. Slowly out of fear of retribution and perhaps slowly so East European leaders can find their own place in their countries, and their countries can find their place in the new order of the world.

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