

EASTERN EUROPE: BACK TO THE FUTURE?

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It is a good time to be thinking seriously about Eastern Europe.

Almost 20 years ago, returning from three years at our Embassy in Warsaw and trying to make sense of what Poland and I had been through, I wrote a paper called "The Revenge of History in Communist Poland." Some of its conclusions may still be of interest.

In that paper I drew on my personal experiences in dealing with Poles and argued that the abolition of public politics under Communism had reinforced the single institution--the family--which was best equipped to withstand the attempt to exert central control over all institutions centrally. I argued that a corollary effect of this strengthening of the family was to strengthen the hold of traditional values in every aspect of national life.

Subsequently, of course, I found that other astute observers had come to the same conclusion. Ken Jowitt arrived at that point as a political scientist working on Romania. Moshe Lewin has made it the basis of his analyses of the Stalinist phenomenon in Russia. So I was in good company in drawing attention to this aspect of the Communist experience in these countries.

But I drew a corollary conclusion which has not achieved the same currency. This was that fidelity to traditional values has generated a peculiar approach to politics as such throughout the area. I found in Poland that the criteria people used to judge political excellence, or political leadership, had little to do with programs and performance, and almost everything to do with morals and ethics. Poles tended to judge leaders not by whether they were or were likely to be effective at moving the country in a given direction, but by whether they were good or bad men: decent or indecent, strong or weak, kind or brutal, loyal or disloyal. My conclusion was that this moralization of politics made świnstwo--swinishness--the primary category for political condemnation.

Since then, as I have come to deal with the USSR and with

other countries of the area, I have found this to be true everywhere. There are, of course, many reasons why it should be true.

It is important to remember that until Communist regimes were imposed, most people in these countries did not participate much in politics. Many, depending on the country, did not even consider themselves members of a national community. But they most certainly did consider themselves members of families, of bloodlines linking generations. On both counts--their non-participatory political experience and their strong family feeling--it was natural that they considered politics to be something someone else did, and that the basis for judgement on political excellence should be the cluster of values their family ties had taught them to esteem: loyalty, generosity, honesty, decency, and the like.

The first Communist leaderships came out of societies like that, and; even more important, their experience as tiny subversive conspiracies led them to recreate the equivalent of peasant families, based this time on ideology rather than blood. Sometimes--we see it still in Romania today--blood also counted. They were different from peasant families, not so much because they saw themselves as pitted against everyone else--peasant families were like that too--but because they were on top. And, of course, the mass parties they created were recruited from millions of just that kind of people.

I am not claiming that the phenomenon of moralized politics was unique to Eastern Europe and the USSR, or completely foreign to us. I do argue that the moralization of politics in Eastern Europe has been very strong and very pervasive. In fact, there was a radical dysfunction between what the Communist regimes were actually doing and what they said they wanted to do.

What they were actually doing was constructing country equivalents of the American big city machine of the past century, huge patronage organizations that delivered favors in return for formal support. Formal ideology helped to hold them together too, but sat rather lightly on the supporters' shoulders. What the regimes said they were doing was ushering in a new world through national programs nationally pursued, all based on profound scientific analysis.

This radical dysfunction encouraged still further the recourse to moralized politics, to personal values as political criteria, which was natural to the system anyway, given its antecedents and personnel. It made lying or truthfulness the political issue for the governed, the overwhelming majority of the population, which included most party members. It made them dismiss the rational programs the regimes said they were imposing, the administration of things as distinguished from the

government of men which they claimed was their objective, as a lying sham, designed to delude the population, a cover for their own desire for personal power and privilege.

It discredited the rational and scientific approach to politics that the Communists said they were trying to introduce. For most people, politics was a question of morality, the difference being that they, the people, were moral--to the extent they steered clear of politics--and the rulers were immoral, together with those they forced or seduced into politics.

The result has been that when opposition has arisen, when the landscape has opened up possibilities for political diversification, for the assertion of options and choices, the future has come to be seen as a return to the past. Those wishing to move forward have marched under the banner of truth and virtue, under the slogan "Throw the rascals out!" Opposition has sought new men rather than alternative programs or, rather, it has proposed superior morality under new and better leaders as its program. It has tended not only to begin with a demand for the truth, but to end there.

It could be argued that this has happened because the regimes will not permit alternative programs, since they would imply group struggle, and thus threaten the legitimacy of one-party rule. I strongly suspect that it goes beyond that, and represents the discrediting of rational politics in favor of moralized and personalized politics by all concerned. In any event, the evidence that this is what the population wants, what any opposition wants when it is permitted to express itself, clutters the landscape of postwar history.

Let me remind you of a few features which have characterized what we see as forward movement in most of the area over the past 30 years. They vary in their urgency and mix depending on the country and the situation, but they are almost all there, almost all the time.

First, there is a struggle to recover the glorious national past from the approach which has dominated history since the Stalin years, with its stress on class and on friendship with Russia or later the Soviet Union. This is a struggle within parties and regimes, as well as between regimes and peoples. For the past 30 years every regime has tried to coopt a national past to its benefit. As in so many areas, Romania has represented the apotheosis, but they have all tried. Lyudmila Zhivkova comes to mind, so does the GDR's adoption of Martin Luther and Frederick the Great. To be sure, the regimes apply the "progressive" label where possible, but they want control of history as a national good with or without it.

Second, almost every political crisis begins with a call for the truth, the whole truth, the unvarnished truth--about the past. The characteristic demand is that the regime admit publicly that it did wrong. This is justified to Westerners as a guarantee against recurrence, but it has such force that I read it as a demand for admission of guilt, a public admission of immoral conduct. In our terms it is ethical rather than political in its essence, or rather it signifies that in East European terms there is no significant distinction between the ethical and the political. And it is a very hardy feature of Soviet and East European politics, which unites those who in our terms are the most retrograde nativists and the most enlightened Westernizers.

In just these past weeks it has cropped up twice in my own reading, in two statements from fine representatives of the rationalist intelligentsia. The first are the excerpts of a video program on Soviet political abuse of psychiatry which appears in The New York Review of Books,¹ Aleksander Podrabinek insists that before Soviet psychiatry can be readmitted to the World Psychiatric Association, the Soviet authorities must admit publicly that they have abused psychiatry for political purposes.

And in this 1977 analysis of the restoration of "order" in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s and his attitude toward it, the Slovak dissident Milan Šimečka writes:

I think I can state without exaggeration that for the people here the post-1970 events certainly did not appear as an abstract process of strengthening the leading role of the Party, removing right-wing elements, purging Czechoslovak culture, deepening cooperation between socialist states, but rather as a historical drama with live characters. It was a play about betrayal, love and hate, about sacrifice and devotion, greatness and baseness, revenge and forgiveness, cowardice and heroism, a drama of courage and cunning, decline and fall, about money, envy, and in fact everything that is splendidly human. I do not wish to conceal the fact that I myself viewed the historical events primarily in that manner and only in that fashion did they fascinate me. It was not until later that I forced myself to view them with professional eyes and started to investigate abstract trends lines of development, the intrinsicity of observed phenomena, historical generalization,

¹ Alexander Podrabinek, "Soviet Psychiatry: A Message from Moscow," The New York Review of Books, 8 December 1988, p. 41.

parallels and lessons.

Furthermore, Šimečka can get only a little way along this rational path. Later on, he goes right back to the moral nub, when he complains, speaking of "elected presidents and dictators alike," that:

There are those who maintain that these days politics is the art of not telling the truth, or better still, not saying anything at all. Or even telling brazen lies in a good cause. One does not get the impression that national leaders feel any shame at such behavior; instead they think they are very clever or that they are merely following the advice of their staff. This art is now so entrenched that voters no longer choose a candidate for their truthfulness, but for their skill and artfulness.²

For Šimečka, therefore, truthfulness is incompatible with skill and artfulness, qualities we in the West like to think of as useful and necessary attributes of political leaders. For him, it is truthfulness that counts.

Third, this demand for truth as the first objective of political action is almost always extremely personalized. It is characteristically accompanied by the demand to throw the incumbents out, and put new men in their place. What I call headhunting is a feature of every political crisis in Eastern Europe. We are seeing it now even in Yugoslavia. But the criterion of excellence is not so much talent, as with Western headhunters, as honesty.

The issue then is not a change of policy, but a restoration of morality through a change of people. What is debated is not the merits and demerits of a reform program, but whether, say, Gierek and Jaroszewicz should be put on trial or whether, say, Bukharin or Trotsky or Slanský or Rajk should be rehabilitated. Of course, alternative programs lurk behind these personal issues. There is a point to the fact that Romanian historians have been able to rehabilitate the old National Liberal program-- "By Ourselves Alone"--and republish works of Ion Brătianu, while the National Peasant Party and its leader Iuliu Maniu remain dangerous reprobates. But form affects content too, and much of the path to the future in Eastern Europe, so far, has led through a personalized and more moral past.

Fourth, and finally, in times of political uncertainty a

² Milan Simecka, The Restoration of Order. The Normalization of Czechoslovakia 1969-1976 (London: Verso, 1984), pp. 17 and 119-20.

remarkable nostalgia emerges in country after country for the last usable past before the Communists came to power or depending on who you are, before the Stalinists took over in 1948-49. This nostalgia for the last pre-Communist or pre-Stalinist past is probably politically the most important form of the general search for a more usable national past. Usually it is the non-Communists or anti-Communists who idealize or reconstruct the last non-Communist period and the Communists who focus on the last pre-Stalinist period.

In the Soviet Union, therefore, you see the resurrection of the Silver Age of Russian culture before the First War, and Solzhenitsyn's August 1914 as almost the paradigm of this nostalgia among non-Communists. Among Communists, by contrast, you have nostalgia for the 1920s, and the struggle over the rehabilitation of grandees of that era purged by Stalin. In Eastern Europe there are more shadings of grey. This is partly because nostalgia for the 1930s gets you quickly into the ticklish issue of the Soviet role. Partly it is because the Communist pre-Stalinist period, from 1944 or 1945 to 1948 or 1949, was short but both nasty and brutish everywhere, and it is remembered by living people, which is no longer the case with Russia's Silver Age and is increasingly rare for the Soviet 1920s.

So it is more difficult to idealize the pre-Communist or pre-Stalinist past in Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, the attempt to do it has been going on for almost 30 years now. I first noticed it in the late 1960s in Poland, with the striking popularity among intellectuals of Andrzej Micewski's histories of the politics of the 1930s.³ They were of good non-professional quality and carried a political subtext for the late 1960s. They described the polarization, toward the end of the prewar decade, around a rightist coalition combining the National Democrats and the Piłsudskiites and a more inchoate leftist coalition of peasant parties and intelligentsia groups, including Christian Democrats, with whom Micewski sympathized. But I suspected that neither the subtext nor the quality really accounted for his popularity. Rather, I thought, it had to be the vision of a non-Communist past which embodied options for Poland that had closed down in the meantime, even if it included Communists. And hence, I thought, he was also suggesting a better future.

Since the late 1960s, the Polish Communists have unearthed their own more open-ended past. This is the 1945-48 period of three-sectorism in the economy--nationalized heights, but also

³ Andrzej Micewski, Z geografii politycznej II Rzeczypospolitej (Warsaw: Znak, 1966), and W cieniu marszałka Piłsudskiego (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1969).

substantial cooperative and private sectors, especially in agriculture--and a modicum of genuine political competition, however skewed and rigged. The most recent display is Andrzej Werblan's political biography of Gomułka up to 1948, published in 1988, and the very earnest discussion of pluralism under party rule and the path not taken, etc., which the book kicked off in Nowe Drogi, the Party's theoretical journal.⁴ Based as it is on the unspoken assumption that the Party is still in charge, it has a certain winsomeness about it.

One can probably discern the same sorts of nostalgia in every East European country, even if they have been exhibited the earliest and most often in Poland. Certainly political memoirs are one of the most titillating branches of an otherwise rather unexciting book trade throughout the area.

To sum up, I have offered four kinds of evidence for the assertion that in Eastern Europe change--movement away from the present toward the future--normally takes place through recovery of the past:

- struggle to recuperate the national past;
- demands for the truth about the past and public admission of guilty lying by the regimes;
- headhunting, the call for replacement of guilty liars by honest, or more honest, rulers; and
- nostalgia for the last period when the future can be described as open.

If we accept that in Eastern Europe forward movement starts with a backward impulse in some special characteristic way, then the question of whether the past has a political future must be important to observers and participants alike. In other words, is there a point at which the past has been recuperated enough--and becomes usable enough--for politics to become not less a question of personal morality than a question of national program which can capture widespread, sustained support?

The very notion of such programs, I have suggested, has been discredited by 40 years of Communist dictatorship. So it is a tough question.

Obviously, Eastern Europe is not the only part of the world where societies and politics move forward by sincere and strenuous effort to return to a Golden Age, usually lost. We spend a lot of political effort in this country keeping the Constitution in working condition, arguing about the intent of the Founders. My argument is not that Eastern Europe is unique

⁴ Andrzej Werblan, Władysław Gomułka, Sekretarz generalny PPR (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1988); Nowe Drogi, No. 8 (471), August 1988, pp. 41-70.

in kind.

But Eastern Europe does seem to me to be unique in the degree to which political change starts by a return to roots, and in the specific character of the roots to be recaptured in order to generate forward movement. My argument is that the moralized and personalized sense of politics which so many in the area share can be an obstacle to change in a democratic direction, as well as an engine for that kind of change. And that holds for those who want it, even more than for those who do not.

In particular, it focusses too much political energy, a commodity in any case in short supply in these Communist dictatorships, on personalities, and creates too much impatience with the hard work required to formulate concrete alternative action programs and to develop broad sustained support for them. And it is thereby a gift to the most conservative and Stalinist elements of the regimes themselves.

First, it feeds their paranoia, and their paranoid argument that any opposition is "objectively" intent, as the saying goes, on restoring the old pre-Communist order. Second, it allows them to continue to pose as the sole authors of "modern," rational politics in these countries, a claim they forfeited in practice years ago. Third, and meanwhile, it defines the political game in a way that invites them to follow their natural bent and shift personnel without changing policies. Happy is the Communist regime that has a Gomulka on the shelf in case of need. And the regimes can be expected to make it tough on those who seek democratic change, by keeping to just those rules of the game.

It may be that in the most backward and oppressive countries advocates of democratic reform have no realistic alternative at this point to simply demanding the simple truth, and first of all the truth about the past, and calling for a higher morality and better people in politics. The West should support them, as we try to do in every country, and as President Mitterrand has now done with such fanfare and to such effect in Czechoslovakia.

But we should recognize that when the political dialogue in an East European country centers overwhelmingly on issues of morality, of truth, and decency, or on large concepts such as Central Europe, we are dealing with a backward and Stalinist country, with an oppressive regime and an oppressed society, living at a stage which the West has long since left behind and which is now being left behind even by certain of its Communist neighbors.

For in Poland, in Hungary, and even to a certain extent and on certain topics in the USSR, the structure of politics has already passed beyond morality to programs and to the struggle

for extended societal support for programs. No sensible person will offer a definitive judgement on whether any of this change is irreversible. But it has certainly taken place. It is also part of the reality we should recognize and address. It is a part of reality I think we should encourage.

The other parts are important too. Poles will continue to struggle over Katyń, over all the blank spots in the history of Polish-Soviet relations, over who was responsible for the calamities of the 1970s and now the 1980s, not to speak of the 1940s. Hungarians will continue to agonize over Imre Nagy's ashes, over 1956 and after. And when it comes to telling the truth about the past, the Soviets, of course, have their work cut out for them. It is important work.

But it is not the only work. For in these countries, we are seeing a change in the character of political dialogue, away from the morality play everyone loves to the formulation of alternative programs and sustained struggle for their adoption and implementation. And that involves a different, and newer, definition of politics. It differs from any of three traditional concepts: the Party as the vanguard of the working class, the working peasantry, and the creative intelligentsia; the struggle between the moral and the immoral; and, finally, the struggle between the rulers and the ruled.

I first noticed the change while following Polish developments from London, in 1980-81. I had lived through the December events of 1970 and their aftermath, and for the first months after August 1980 most of the political landmarks were still familiar. In particular, most of the workers' demands were still the same: free trade unions and better working conditions, but most of all the truth, and the punishment and replacement of the guilty men.

Then, sometime in that wonderful springtime of 1981, the landscape changed, and I was suddenly looking at a different landscape, a different Poland. Probably because I was overly attached to my special knowledge and experience, I was slow to realize it, and it came upon me suddenly. I realized I no longer understood Poland, but I knew it was different from the Poland I had known.

This chastening recognition of change has also been useful. Having been caught out once, I simply did not believe, when martial law came, that everything would snap back to what had been before, like a rubber band.

I am not yet sure I understand the essence of the change, but I think I can identify one of its major features. In my time, oppositionists, or simply honest men, had devoted their whole effort to preserving their personal integrity and their

families against the overwhelming and overweening power of a dictatorial state. Their demands in 1970 and again in 1980 had reflected that situation: the truth, punishment of the guilty, admission of guilt, new honest men whom honest men could trust.

By contrast, beginning in 1981 you saw men and women banding together to formulate interlocking programs for political, economic, cultural, and civilizational change, from the bottom up, and for institutional guarantees of their continuing capacity to do so. They had begun to act as if they were free men and women responsible for their own destinies. They no longer had the luxury of simply judging those who governed them against moral and ethical criteria and of demanding their replacement by better people. Compared to that change, the fact that they were still not in fact free, and that those who governed them were much the same too, was almost puny. I believed that the change was fundamental, that it would probably not be reversed as a social and political fact, and that, even if it came from a better past, it would lead to a better future.

By their own efforts--and a little help from their friends--the Poles have borne me out, and I still believe it. I also believe that indigenous, national versions of the same phenomenon, the same transformations of politics as it has been into politics as it will be, are emerging in Hungary and in the European USSR today. And I believe that it can happen in the other countries of the area as well.

The way will have been prepared by generations of men and women who believed they were doing nothing more--and aspired to nothing more--than preserving and re-acquiring a glorious past against the relentless efforts of scoundrels to destroy it for dishonest personal gain. If it happens, it will happen despite them, as well as in spite of the scoundrels. But they will have helped to make it happen.

And in the more backward countries--indeed in all these countries--these lovers of the past, these seekers after a Golden Age, still have a historic task before them: to demand the truth, an accounting, the punishment of the guilty, protection of the innocent. They deserve our support. We Americans have our own powerful and honorable tradition of morality in politics. Indeed, we have learned again and again that no US policy for Eastern Europe which tries to do without morality can be sustained. And there will be an attractive overlap between the moral and ethical values of East European oppositionists who strive for a return to a better past as their countries' best future and an American policy of encouraging progress toward a more democratic future.

But that overlap is partly real and partly fictitious. The Golden Age in these countries, if it is democratic, is partly

fictitious, and, if real, only partly democratic. Democratic institutions and habits of mind belong more to the present and even more to the future than to the past. The extreme moralism of the politics of most of the opposition is understandable, and admirable. But our support for them must be based on honest recognition, by them and by us, that for Americans democracy lives on the tension between moral man and amoral society; that they will have to go beyond their definition of politics as a matter of pure morals; beyond a zero-sum game; and that we hope for and encourage a brand of democracy that will be a challenge to them as well as to the regimes they face.

It may not happen. But history has been with me so far, and I face the East European future with modest confidence.

