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Central Europe & the USSR

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The relations between the countries of Eastern Europe have always been extremely difficult—if not paranoiac. After the euphoria of the "liberation" of 1989, the situation is now even more complex and confused than ever. The dangerous uncertainty and unpredictability that one can observe in every aspect of life throughout the area is particularly evident when one considers the relations between Eastern Europe and the Kremlin. By "Eastern Europe," I mean here Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, and not the southern part of the former bloc where Gorbachev has been more successful in achieving "middle of the road solutions," and where democratization remains quite limited.

At present, these countries are torn between two apparently contradictory fears, having to deal with: 1) The Soviet Union's regaining strength; and 2) An eastern neighbor in a state of disarray or even aggravated chaos. On the one hand, the prominent Solidarity leader Karol Modzelewski wrote in Zycie Warszawy on February 8, "One might fear that after restoring order at home, the Soviet generals will want to recover their position in Eastern Europe. At that point, Poland, Hungary, and Czecho-Slovakia would find themselves on the front line of the threat." On the other hand, the Foreign Minister, Krysztof Skubiszewski, stressed in Tygodnik Powszechny on March 17, "Should the Soviet Union fall apart, the Soviet Union's closest European neighbors won't be in position to control [by themselves] some of the consequences of the events, e.g. a wave of refugees, the activity of armed groups. In this situation all the countries will feel the effects of the crisis, but Poland will be the most affected. This problem is of tremendous importance for the security of the area and of Europe."
In fact, the second fear causes much greater concern, although recent events in the Kremlin seem to have given credence to the view that Gorbachev may soon be replaced by "hard-liners." But the typical view is that even in that case the Soviet leaders will be much more concerned with their own affairs for some years than with a desperate attempt to rebuild the lost" external empire." Paradoxically, therefore, the newly liberated countries of Eastern Europe are praying for at least some kind of order and peaceful evolution in the Soviet

Even if countries that only yesterday were engaged in a struggle against communism and Soviet domination are now trying to build relations with Moscow that are as "good neighborly" as possible, this is not an easy task. Many urgent problems have to be tackled, of which the following are among the most important:

The Evacuation of Soviet Troops

The situation is very different with regard to Hungary and Czechoslovakia on the one hand, and Poland on the other. The Soviet Union has signed agreements with the first two countries, and all the Soviet troops will have left Hungary and Czechoslovakia by the end of June 1991. Not so with respect to Poland. A year ago, Gorbachev gave his approval to former Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki for a withdrawal by the end of 1991. During the presidential campaign Lech Walesa then confirmed this date. Subsequently, however, the negotiations almost broke down. The Kremlin said that the withdrawal would be completed no earlier than the end of 1994. The Poles responded that in that case they would not give their agreement to the transit through Poland of the 400,000 soldiers stationed in the former GDR. In February, a strongly worded statement made by General Viktor Dubinin, Commander of the Northern Group of Soviet Armed Forces in Poland (previously Soviet Commander-in-Chief in Afghanistan), infuriated the Poles. According to the general, Poland’s motive was to "gain maximum profit at the cost of the Soviet nation, even in violation of international law," and to "dictate degrading conditions" in order to "humiliate the Soviet Union." He threatened, "we will leave with our flags unfurled and in keeping with our own plans"—i.e., without the consent of the
Polish side. After all, said the general, the Poles should remember that they obtained "for permanent use" the former German territories in the west and north only thanks to the Red Army . . . . The official Soviet view is that the situation in Poland is different from Hungary or Czechoslovakia: Soviet troops liberated Poland and are there on the basis of a treaty.

However, negotiations have now begun to make progress. The Soviets have agreed to complete their evacuation by December 1993, and the Poles have given their approval for the beginning of the transit of Soviet troops from Germany. But there are further problems which require attention. Thus the USSR is demanding from the three countries compensation for buildings constructed on the bases. The Hungarians were the first to refuse, demanding huge penalties for ecological damage. In Poland as well as Hungary, the Soviet troops will leave vast areas of ecological destruction. Large quantities of crude oil and gasoline have seeped into the soil at all 35 Soviet bases in Poland, as well as at airfields, fuel and munitions dumps. So far the Soviets do not seem willing to pay for anything.

Soviet Exodus?

Deputy Polish Foreign Minister Alexander Krzyminski told me, "We signed all the agreements on human rights, including the Helsinki Agreement, we cannot be against the free flow of people. Indeed, we need to fight for us ourselves to be welcomed in the West. " At present, a highly paradoxical situation exists: Since April 8, Poles can travel freely to Western Europe without visas, causing concern in France and Germany. Yet at the same time Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary anxiously await possible wave of Soviet refugees. Probably over 21,000 Soviet citizens are already working illegally in Poland.

At a time of growing unemployment (soon Poland will have two million jobless), the presence of large numbers of Soviet workers may have serious social consequences. The Czechoslovak army has been ordered to establish "special duty detachments" to
defend the country's eastern border against an anticipated wave of refugees. Thanks to its experience of dealing with Romanian refugees, Hungary seems to be best prepared to face the problem. Three huge camps have already been organized with a number of smaller centers, together with a very sophisticated computer system.

How many persons are likely to come west? The estimates vary greatly, and the numbers will clearly depend on the situation in the Soviet Union. Should the position remain "normal" (e.g. martial law is not imposed), the Polish Foreign Ministry expects about 800,000 individuals to arrive in Poland in the course of a single year, and it stresses that Poland will not be able to cope with the situation on its own.

In general, the relations between "The Three" and the Soviet Union are fraught with uncertainty, unpredictability, and potential dangers. All the more so, in that the Soviet leaders themselves are having difficulty in determining their policy toward their former external empire. Thus Vladimir Razuvayev explained in Novoe Vremya (6, 1991) that the Soviet Union has three possibilities: Forget about Eastern Central Europe, make these countries pay (for example, economically) for their abandonment of the Soviet Union, or try to build normal relations with the USSR's neighbors. The author chooses the latter because, as he likes to put it, the Soviet Union must become accustomed to the idea that from now on "The West begins in Poland." While complaining that the events in Eastern Europe not only undermined the credibility of socialism in the Soviet Union, but also "encouraged separatist tendencies in the Republics," even Valeri Musatov in Pravda (March 13) favors the quest for "modern ways of cooperation" with these countries. Nevertheless, the future remains clouded.

At the same time, Poles, Hungarians, and Czechoslovaks are perhaps even more concerned about the uncertainty of their relations with the West. After the euphoria has passed, what indeed will we do? Will we share the burden and help these countries overcome the legacy of communism? Will the populations of the Western countries be willing to do this at a time of recession? The answer is doubtful, especially if the Soviet Union displays great restraint in dealing with Eastern Europe, thus confirming that the
threat is over. Will we then leave Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia to clear up their own mess, with all the social consequences and the already visible devils of nationalism, intolerance, and anti-Semitism? Probably a half-way solution will be found, and we will do just enough to help these countries to improve very slowly and become a "B-Europe," similar in relation to Western Europe to what Latin America is to the United States.

Everywhere one finds question marks, and so far no answers. Only one conclusion is certain: Not only for what may remain of the Soviet Union, but also for us in the West, the new Eastern Europe will be a source of great concern—if not of dire anxiety.

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