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EASTERN EUROPE AND THE FUTURE OF
THE SOVIET EMPIRE

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Eastern Europe is a very special part of the world for Moscow. It is the only geographical area other than the Soviet Union itself where the future of the whole Soviet system of power can be decided. Soviet relations with no other part of the world bear so directly on its very existence--not even those with the United States, stabilized as they are by mutual deterrence, and also not the relations with China which Moscow has very much within its control to prevent from taking a dangerous turn. Eastern Europe is different because the countries of this area, though formally foreign, are in important ways part of the extended Soviet homeland, and a particularly vulnerable one.

The peculiar relationship is the ambivalent legacy of Stalin who acquired for his country an empire in eastern Europe as the principal safeguard of Soviet security as he understood it. Yet forty years later the empire became a major source of Soviet insecurity. It has been the only area--apart from the special case of Afghanistan--where Moscow has repeatedly felt compelled to intervene militarily in order to safeguard its interests.

In 1945, when the empire was being formed, George Kennan was one of the very few contemporaries who anticipated with remarkable accuracy what might happen. What he wrote in May of that year deserves to be quoted verbatim:

Russian government now has a heavy responsibility to itself; namely, to hold the conquered provinces in submission. For there can be little doubt that many of the peoples concerned will be impatient and resentful of Russian rule. And successful revolts on their part against Moscow authority might shake

the entire structure of Soviet power. The great question of Russia's new world position, as seen from Moscow, is whether the Soviet state will be able to carry successfully these new responsibilities, to consolidate its hold over the new peoples, to reconcile this with the traditional political structure of the Russian people, to make of its conquests a source of strength rather than weakness. This is the real question of Russia's future.

Kennan derived his prescience from a keen sense of history -- something which has always been much more an attribute of east European, including Russian, political culture than Western political culture. For better or for worse, people in that part of the world have always been inclined to look to past antecedents and experiences for clues to their present predicaments. It is with that historical view in mind that the conclusion is inescapable that the Soviet empire, like all previous empires, is ultimately doomed. This is the view which Henry Kissinger, the historian, once voiced but for which he did not find a receptive audience when he applied it to the American empire as well.

The trouble with thinking in such a long term is that one can better foretell that the inevitable will happen than when it will happen and how. Nevertheless, we ought to ask the question of where we stand today in the process that started in 1945 (or perhaps it should be dated as far back as 1939 when Stalin, then in collusion with Hitler, first embarked on his quest for security through imperial expansion) and that will end in some still indefinite future. The great advantage of the historical view is in enabling us

to account for what has changed over those years rather than to merely record what has remained the same.

What has remained the same is rather clear and not particularly enlightening, namely, the Soviet desire and determination to preserve control over eastern Europe. It is what has changed that is really instructive. In fact, that desire and determination were not enough to prevent one country, Yugoslavia, from escaping Soviet control at the very time the empire was formed, and another, Albania, followed suit later on. The others that became part of the Soviet orbit in 1945 are still in it, subjected to Moscow's will, but in very different ways than they used to be thirty or thirty five years ago.

It is the differences in both the internal structure of the individual countries and in their relations with Moscow that provide the true measure of the change. There was once a time, namely in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when a systematic attempt was made to turn all these countries into little replicas of the Soviet Union. Today little is left of that quixotic attempt to make uniformity out of diversity in the notoriously heterogeneous part of Europe. So much have the historic differences reasserted themselves while new ones have been added that the question is sometimes being asked whether a relapse to the 19th-century "Balkanization" might be the shape of the things to come.

That was the time when eastern Europe was reputed as the powder keg of Europe, and deservedly so. Certainly the uncontrollable dynamism of the local nationalisms provides no small part of the explanation of why World War I started the way it did and at the time it did. And it has been argued that the region could again explode and even

bring the superpowers into the fray. According to the more specious version of the argument -- never endorsed by specialists on eastern Europe or the Soviet Union -- Moscow therefore plays a constructive role as a regional Ordnungsmacht, being the only one supposedly capable to keep the lid on the brewing nationalist passions which would otherwise get out of control.

The Soviet Union is thus cast, somewhat incongruously, in a role reminiscent of 19th-century Britain striving to keep unruly peoples of the disintegrating Ottoman empire subdued for the sake of international stability. Or, perhaps more appropriately, it has been likened to Austria-Hungary whose disappearance from the region has since been genuinely regretted even by the east Europeans themselves. Indeed, of all the defunct empires, the Soviet one today bears the greatest similarities with its Austro-Hungarian predecessor, and the similarities are not encouraging for Moscow given the eventual fate of that empire.

The relative decline of the ruling nationality, increasingly outnumbered by other ethnic groups resentful of its predominance, is as disturbing from the Soviet point of view as is the growing political impasse reminiscent of Austria-Hungary's declining years. But there at least intellectual creativity flourished, including much imaginative thinking about how the empire could reorganize itself by conciliating and accommodating the diverse interests of its component parts -- before the accident of World War I rendered all of this obsolete. In contrast, sterility of mind ranks high among the ailments of the Soviet polity today.

The powder keg analogy should not be pressed too far. Indeed, those who have been drawing comparisons between the present situation and that prior to 1914 have usually discovered more differences than similarities of substance, and this is particularly true about the condition of eastern Europe where a great deal has changed since. After the 1919 peace settlement, which many of its peoples resented, the region certainly remained full of problems; however, these were gradually getting less rather than more explosive when outside powers, namely Germany and Italy, deliberately chose to exacerbate them for their own purposes in the nineteen-thirties. Thus, if World War II again came from eastern Europe this was not because the region's persisting problems made it inevitable but rather because of the ambitions of the Fascist powers to which the local peoples were mere pawns.

During World War II, to be sure, rekindled nationalist passions reached farther than ever in eastern Europe -- as they did in other parts of the world. But so did efforts to overcome them by devising a structure of regional cooperation. And if these failed it was not because of their shortcomings but rather because the Soviet Union, aiming at a very different kind of international organization, did not wish them to succeed. It cannot be emphasized strongly enough that the postwar order was imposed from the outside upon unwilling populations which even after a change of generations have merely acquiesced in it but have never come to regard it as normal. For this was the first time in history that their area became integrated under the auspices of a single imperial power rather than several imperial powers and that this

power, rightly or wrongly regarded by its foreign subjects as inferior in almost everything but brute force, attempted to mold it more thoroughly to its own image than any of the previous ones had done.

But that unprecedented situation also created the preconditions for giving the east Europeans a greater sense of common destiny than before although this has not been the kind of destiny the Soviet Union envisaged for them. Their common experience under Soviet domination has had a unifying effect by generating a common resentment which has overshadowed the admittedly persisting and sometimes even increasing national animosities. But these animosities themselves have changed in character. No boundaries are seriously contested in eastern Europe any more -- no small tribute to the accomplishment of the peacemakers of 1919 who drew most of them (with the notable exception of the corrections which the Soviet Union arbitrarily imposed later on Poland and the Baltic peoples and which, ironically, have created the most lasting resentments). Also little is left of that parochial nationalism that breeds hatred because of ignorance and physical isolation. Despite all the obstacles in their way, the east Europeans today know each other better than before. Thanks to the revolution in mass communications, which gives them access to Western media, they are in fact among the best informed people in the world and even their movement across national boundaries, however restricted by Western standards, is still more extensive than it has ever been.

The point is that there has been a process of political maturation under way in eastern Europe which makes an outburst of nationalist passion oblivious to consequences much less likely than before, certainly less likely than in many another part of the world, including parts of western Europe -- as the examples of northern Ireland or the Basque country illustrate. The crisis that recently shook Poland to its

foundations was a model of moderation by comparison. It demonstrated the presence of a remarkable political subtlety and sense of responsibility all the more impressive among a people not notable for these qualities previously. No one in eastern Europe does seriously argue today that it is possible or even desirable trying to break out of the Soviet bloc in any foreseeable future; the topic is simply not an item for the agenda even for those who find Soviet domination intolerable. This has been the well-learned lesson of 1956 when the Hungarians, driven by both nationalism and a desire for freedom, tried and failed.

But the story of eastern Europe ever since that landmark year has been that of alternative challenges to the Soviet-imposed order -- challenges which the east Europeans have been posing with a resourcefulness never quite anticipated by outsiders. Certainly these have been repeatedly caught by surprise by developments that accentuate the precariousness of the so-called "Yalta order" of a Europe divided into spheres of influence -- an order which both the Soviets and many Westerners, albeit for different reasons, would rather see as permanent. And the challenges, each more subtle and complicated than its predecessor, have found the Soviet Union increasingly ill-equipped and hesitant to cope with.

This was also true in 1968 when the Czechoslovak reformers challenged the very essence of Soviet Communism by seeking to revitalize the doctrine and give it a "human face." In his May 1945 article, Kennan anticipated that the newly acquired western lands could also become the hotbed of ideological contagion to the Soviet empire, as they had been to the tsarist one. And although the Czechs professed the same ideology as the Soviets themselves their challenge to the Moscow rulers was

no less revolutionary than had been that of the pre-World War radical Socialists from the Tsar's western lands to his autocracy. It mattered little that the Prague reformers wanted to change the system from within and do so in an evolutionary way. For if brought to the logical conclusion the final result of their efforts would have been indistinguishable from a true democracy, regardless of what label they might have chosen to give it.

But by 1968 Marxism was no longer the foundation of the Soviet rule in eastern Europe if it had ever been. As Brezhnev angrily retorted when the Czechs tried to reassure the Soviet Politburo by arguing that their efforts served the common goal of communism: "Don't talk to me about communism." This showed the distance traveled since the time when the spread of Soviet power was identified with the spread of communism and showed also the dead end of any attempt at reforming the system by revitalizing its ideology. The notion of communism with a human face has been discredited not because it was not given a chance as a result of the Soviet intervention that interrupted the experiment. It was rather because even its erstwhile proponents concluded that the notion was a contradiction in terms.

In any case, never again would the Soviet power in eastern Europe be challenged by introducing an alternative version of Marxism. Not only has the doctrine lost the necessary appeal. The alternative has also become irrelevant in view of the fact that Soviet rule rests on power rather than on any such appeal. Again this is what Kennan predicted already in 1945 when he wrote that

the Soviet policy "has behind it no great idea which could inspire the various peoples of the area and bind them together into a single political entity with a single purpose. Pure Marxism is dated..." Significantly, therefore, also the effort at restabilization undertaken since the intervention in Czechoslovakia has not aimed at restoring uniformity on the basis of common ideology; instead, the Soviet Union has allowed considerable diversity while at the same time trying to increase the different countries' economic dependence on itself. Thus ideological incentives to maintain the cohesion of the bloc have been replaced by material ones, with military compulsion always looming in the background as the means of last resort.

But the Soviet Union has also tried to end subsidizing eastern Europe, thus turning it from an economic liability an economic asset. This was done in the 1970s not only by hardening the favorable terms that the east Europeans had so far been enjoying in their trade with the Soviet Union, particularly in regard to fuel, but also by allowing them easier access to Western credits, advanced technology, and even consumer goods. It is uncertain, though of absorbing interest, whether Moscow allowed this politically risky development by design or by default; what is certain is that the growing economic interdependence with the West, far more extensive in the case of eastern Europe than in that of the Soviet Union proper, proved profoundly destabilizing by the time of the 1980 Polish crisis.

The challenge to Soviet rule posed by that crisis was again of a new kind. But although the economic breakdown, which discredited the regime, served as the catalyst the

challenge was not primarily economic. The Poles, having learned from both the Hungarian and the Czechoslovak experiences, were trying neither to break out of the Soviet bloc nor to reform it from within. Instead the Polish opposition sought to apply political and economic pressure on the regime from without in order to compel it to specific concessions which would eventually change its character. At issue was not assuming the responsibility for governing but rather influencing the manner in which the regime governs. The result of a spontaneous but non-violent movement from below, this was a challenge both more massive and more subtle than previously in either Czechoslovakia or Hungary. And it occurred in eastern Europe's most populous and most anti-Soviet nation at a time of unprecedented economic distress.

Together these factors more than explain why the Soviet Union never intervened directly and militarily. But they do not sufficiently explain the kind of intervention that eventually did take place. While the introduction of martial law by the Polish military regime was certainly viewed in Moscow as being in Soviet interest (although conceivably only after the operation succeeded) conclusive evidence that this had been commissioned and executed at Soviet command is still not available. What the Polish experience did prove is the existence in eastern Europe of powerful groups with vested interest in the status quo and enough resources to act to preserve it regardless of what the Soviet preferences may be. Such groups may sometimes act in Soviet interest, as the Jaruzelski regime has apparently done in Poland, but at other times may not -- witness the Ceausescu regime in Romania. But the Soviet connection seems to be less germane to their

behavior than the fact of their having interests of their own which in turn may or may not coincide with the preferences of their respective peoples -- as they largely do in Hungary and do not in East Germany.

At a time of rapid leadership turnover in Moscow, the ascendancy of the east European elites as political actors in their own right is a portentous development highlighting a growing accumulation of domestic and international problems to which there are no easy answers. (Unlike in Hungary after 1956 or in Czechoslovakia after 1968, a program to overcome the Polish crisis is yet to be presented.) In such a situation, the presence of a new and untried leadership in Moscow can provide some of its more established and experienced counterparts in eastern Europe opportunities for increasing their freedom of action if they wish -- not against Soviet interests but in areas where the Soviets have been unwilling or unable to define those interests. And in view of the nature of the problems at hand, such areas are likely to be expanding rather than contracting.

How have the east European regimes availed themselves of the opportunities inherent in this extraordinary situation? The answer is to be expected: in very different ways and very much in their styles.- Again the trends of development tend to accentuate the historic differences among the six countries of the Soviet bloc, further enhanced by their different experiences under Communist rule. Let us examine them in turn.

Bulgaria has the distinction of being ruled by the oldest continuously functioning leadership in Soviet eastern Europe. It is a country with the most pervasive record of pro-Soviet conformism sustained by the region's last relatively intact tradition of Russophilism (although even there the historic

stereotype of willing acceptance of all things Russian belies a more complicated reality). Also Bulgarian economy, always favored by Moscow as a showcase of Soviet-style centralization, is in comparatively good condition, partly because of the regime's prudence in borrowing money abroad. It would seem that in Bulgaria one would have to wait the longest for an independent-minded leadership to emerge. And even after the present one is gone, its successors will have fewer incentives than elsewhere to seek for themselves a greater freedom of action.

The case of Romania is special in the sense that its leadership has gone the farthest insecuring for itself such a freedom of action for many years already. The Romanians have demonstrated unmatched skill in determining and quite possibly stretching the limits of Soviet tolerance which they have managed to exploit to a degree hardly imaginable at the time when Stalin subjugated their country with exemplary thoroughness. And he, too, ranking it near the top of his strategic priorities, could have hardly suspected that for his successors Romania would rank near the bottom compared with other members of the Warsaw pact. But, apart from adding to the prerogatives of an exceedingly narrow coterie of the leader's sycophants, which may be the most corrupt ruling group in Europe, what have been the value of the accomplishment? A victim of economic mismanagement second only to Poland's, Romania's standard of living is by far the lowest in the Soviet bloc while its record of domestic repression, including that of ethnic minorities, is possibly the worst. In any case, the quest for autonomy Romanian-style has not been imitated and is unlikely to be.

The present Polish regime resembles the Romanian one in its narrow base of support, economic incompetence, and proclivity for repression. But, unlike Ceausescu, who started out as a recognized champion of nationalism and has still remained one for many of his compatriots, Jaruzelski and his cohorts never ceased to be regarded as traitors by theirs. Also the immediate problems of the Poles are more severe than those of the Romanians -- both in keeping the Soviet Union reassured and in creating a domestic consensus. Moreover, in stark contrast to the Byzantine subtlety of the Romanians, the Polish leadership in confronting its staggering problems has so far only displayed the rigidity and sterility often characteristic of military mind in countries where the military enjoy too exalted a status. As a result, a regime seemingly in an excellent position to expand its room for maneuver because the Russians need it so badly is probably incapable of taking advantage of the situation, at least not as it is constituted today.

In this respect, Poland may be trailing even behind Czechoslovakia -- otherwise the epitome of political immobility and official subservience to Moscow. For although outwardly the subservience is far more pervasive than in Poland, the Prague regime has also done something that its Warsaw counterpart has not, namely, to publicize its people's unhappiness about a crucial Soviet foreign policy decision -- the deployment of Soviet missiles on its territory. Admittedly, this has been done gingerly and indirectly -- by reporting without comment or even with disapproval about "stacks" of critical letters received by the party newspaper, and in a few private conversations of government officials with foreigners. But the opposition has been voiced all the same, even if this did not lead to further action. And like in Bulgaria, not much

independent action of any kind is to be expected from leaders whose problems are creeping rather than acute -- from the country's aging industrial plant to a religious revival among its youths.

The missiles have become an issue also in East Germany, only more conspicuously. Particularly church opposition against the deployment has been publicized there by a regime otherwise reputed as the Soviet Union's perhaps most reliable satellite. But the reputation is misleading; it has certainly not implied the degree of obsequiousness that has been the hallmark of Czechoslovakia. The most insecure of all eastern European states because of its artificial origins and long-persisting uncertainty about its very raison d'être, the GDR has had a consistent record of trying to impress on Moscow its indispensability. This has amounted to a coherent policy of national interest as defined by the ruling group -- more coherent than anywhere else in the Soviet bloc with the possible exception of Romania. But unlike in Romania, there are implications for the future.

The pursuit of the East German leadership's peculiar national interest may have occasionally collided with Soviet wishes -- as it did in 1971 when Walter Ulbricht had to be fired for obstructing Moscow's normalization of relations with Bonn. But unlike then, when the Soviet Union had to teach the East Germans how those relations are properly to be handled, now the shoe seems to be on the other foot. By their own rapprochement with Bonn at a time when Soviet Western policy is all but frozen the East Germans are implicitly demonstrating that more trade and fewer missiles may be not only in their but also in Soviet interest. And the Russians, who in 1968 had been so impervious to the Czechs' attempts to define common interest, are apparently more willing to listen now and perhaps even to

encourage the demonstration. If this is so then a strong government of a client state is taking over the initiative from a weak government of the dominant power in a bid for more partnership rather than mere subordination. Such a trend, if it persists, would amount to a novelty well deserving close attention.

A bid for more partnership with Moscow does not necessarily make a regime more popular with its own people. However, the East German one has taken steps in that direction as well, and in doing so has assumed risks. The sudden loosening up of restrictions on emigration, which has enabled thousands of disgruntled GDR citizens to leave the country, has seriously compromised the so far unwavering claim to their loyalty by this most ideological of the east European regimes. That the concession has been largely purchased by West German money does not detract from its significance, for it shows that matters of principle previously thought of as sacrosanct are now for sale. In more than one way, therefore, East Germany today stands in the forefront of development in eastern Europe.

In this respect, it shares the stage with Hungary whose efforts at greater freedom of action -- with rather than against the Soviet Union -- are perhaps more understandable though hardly any less impressive. Like the East Germans, Kádár has succeeded long time ago in persuading Moscow about his indispensability, having taken full advantage of his being one of the very few pre-1956 leaders of any stature who had not been discredited. Not only has he proved his personal indispensability but, unlike his Polish counterparts today, he has also been able to overcome a disaster by conciliation and eventually preside over a regime boasting both an unmatched measure of popular acceptance for its moderation and high Soviet respect for its efficiency.

The secret of the Hungarians' success has been in adapting the Soviet form to give it another substance without loudly advertising the transformation. Thus, for example, their collectivized agriculture has performed efficiently while maintaining a "human face" as well -- by extensive concessions to private enterprise. And the Soviets have been contemplating the Hungarian experiment with fascination and envy rather than with alarm, aware that the model is not applicable to their own problems. They have thus been disposed to acknowledge in effect that the east Europeans can often do things better than themselves, and acquiesce in the situation. Nor have the Hungarians been averse to trying to elevate the reality to a principle. As central committee member Mátyás Szuros wrote in the January 1984 issue of Taradalmi Szemle, the problems of individual states "do not call for uniform solutions, but much more for methods that make optimum allowances for [national] characteristics." And he added that "national interests can be subordinated to common interests only in an extraordinary situation."

In view of such unorthodox statements made in a seemingly ordinary situation but against the background of an extraordinary succession of the region's increasingly intractable crisis, what are the prospects for eastern Europe as part of the Soviet empire? In December 1985, it will be ten years since the same question was raised at the London meeting of American diplomats during which Helmut Sonnenfeldt employed the concept of "organic relationship" that later provoked so much public fury. At the risk of inviting the same effect, let us proceed with a similar exercise of relating the current situation to long-term trends, -- though not necessarily the hundred-year outlook that was mentioned at the London meeting -- and examine how the previous analysis has withstood the test of

time.

The concept of an organic relationship as originally formulated presumed that the kind of relationship the Soviet Union imposed on the east Europeans against their will within the framework of the "Yalta order" was unnatural and therefore dangerous. It ought to be replaced by a system which, while recognizing the geopolitical realities of predominant Soviet interest in the region, would no longer be based on power alone. Otherwise eastern Europe might "sooner or later explode causing World War III."

Since then, the diversity of eastern Europe has further increased. The events of recent years, particularly the developments in Poland have certainly demonstrated the diminishing viability of the system that prescribes the domestic political structures the east Europeans are supposed to keep. But the same developments have also demonstrated that this unnatural state of affairs need not explode into a World War III because of the effective inhibitions operating on all sides. When the concept of an organic relationship was first advocated in 1975, this was against the background of and in response to a dramatically rising Soviet power. It was as a formula intended to help channel the exercise of that power in a more malleable direction. But today Soviet might, formidable as it is, is not what it used to be in the early nineteen-seventies. For several years now, there has been a weak leadership in Moscow, though not in Washington, and the world "correlation of forces" appears considerably less favorable for the Soviet Union than it did in the heyday of *détente*.

At the same time, during the last decade the Soviet Union has made little, if any, progress in making its rule in eastern Europe more acceptable and less dependent on sheer power.

It has certainly not managed to revitalize its ideological foundations -- nor has it even tried - and as far as the economic benefits of the system are concerned, they have diminished for both the ruler and the ruled. The economic gap between East and West is widening, not narrowing.

This continued inability of the Soviet Union to base its rule in eastern Europe on anything else but sheer power may be unfortunate but ought to be accepted as a fact of life which is unlikely to change. The question is then not so much whether the Soviets could be induced to substitute their reliance on power with a different kind of relationship, but rather whether they would be ready to change the power relationship they have by reducing its content -- out of recognition of the necessity, to be sure, rather than because of any sudden outpouring of good will. We should therefore be particularly sensitive to any signs of such a readiness.

In August 1983, for example, The Observer referred to Hungarian sources in reporting about an alleged meeting between Kádár and Andropov during which the possibility of a re-united Germany in neutralized Europe free from both Soviet and American troops was supposedly on the agenda. It is less important whether such a proposition is viable or even whether the meeting ever took place as reported -- and Andropov has since died anyway. What really matters is that discussions involving a radical redefinition of Soviet security interests must be taking place in the Kremlin-- probably with inconclusive results.

This is a situation which could enable east European leaders, if they choose, to come to Moscow and, invoking Lenin, refer to partnership rather than mere subordination as

"the idea whose time has come." If, as a result, the Soviet empire then evolves accordingly this may or may not help the people in their countries. It also may or may not be welcome to the West which, after all, has flourished while the Soviet Union maintained its oppressive rule in eastern Europe. But the point is that if the trend takes hold the answers to both of these questions will be found less in Moscow than in the respective east European capitals. The United States and other Western countries would then also have more rather than less opportunity to influence the outcomes, And if those outcomes are not favorable to Western interests it would be more difficult to put the blame on the Russians.