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BURDENS AND BENEFITS
OF THE SOVIET UNION IN EASTERN EUROPE

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I.

No historical experience can easily prepare Americans or West Europeans to appreciate fully the extent to which Soviet leaders have come to identify the fate and future of the countries of Eastern Europe with the very survival of the Soviet Union itself. No previous Western empire in recent history--certainly not the British, the French, the Dutch, or the Portugese--held on to its possessions in the face of chronic instability and indeed extraordinarily serious and recurrent challenges to its authority--all that despite little or no apparent economic benefits.

By Western standards, the increasing costs to the Soviet Union of its empire in Eastern Europe seem to provide ample reasons why Moscow should gradually begin to liquidate the empire in its present form, at a time when it could still shape such a "Finlandized" future for the region that might not be unduly detrimental to vital Soviet interests. The costs that would prompt Moscow to opt for such a fundamental reorientation include the following:

Economically, the immediate postwar pattern during which the Soviet Union systematically and extensively exploited Eastern Europe has been reversed. Although the "average" East European continues to believe otherwise, the fact of the matter is that at least for a decade now, and possibly longer, Moscow has found itself compelled to sustain the East European economies through favorable credit arrangements and apparently vast trade subsidies. Michael Marresse and Jan Vanous estimate that Soviet trade subsidies averaged \$5.8 billion during 1974-78 and increased to \$10.4 billion in 1979 and to as much as \$21.7 billion in 1980. U.S.

intelligence sources estimate Soviet aid to Eastern Europe and to other communist states of about \$24 billion in 1980. Put another way, the economic cost of Eastern Europe has risen to 2.5 to 3.0 percent of the Soviet GNP, essentially doubling since the early 1970's.

Militarily, the value of Eastern Europe to the Soviet Union has declined, though it certainly has not disappeared. On the one hand, in this age of missiles and nuclear weapons the traditional function of a defensive buffer zone--an enhanced territorial capability--has lost much of its previous meaning; after all, a conventional Western attack on the Soviet Union through Eastern Europe must be regarded, even in Moscow, as an unlikely prospect. Moreover, the reliability of the East European military in an East-West confrontation is in doubt; worse, in such a confrontation additional Soviet troops might well be needed to keep Eastern Europe under control. On the other hand, Eastern Europe does make a contribution to the Warsaw Pact, and providing an opportunity for Moscow to deploy intermediate-range missiles in the region which serve to politically intimidate Western Europe as well as to counter similar NATO missiles.

Ideologically, there is something to be said, even now, for the momentous postwar change Stalin engineered from "socialism in one country" to "socialism in one region." On paper, the Soviet Union has ceased to be alone and its patterns are being emulated in Eastern Europe. Members of the Soviet elite relate with pride the friendly welcome they claim to receive in Bulgarian resorts by the Black Sea. In reality, of course, the ideological consequence of the essential failure of Soviet-style communism in

Eastern Europe has been the collapse of both the Soviet-led international communist movement and the Soviet vision of a communist world order. No single issue has caused more division in international communism and hence no single issue has contributed more to the disintegration of the spirit of communist idealism than the heavy-handed Soviet treatment of Eastern Europe, especially in 1948-49, 1953, 1956, 1968, and 1981.

In terms of Soviet foreign policy objectives elsewhere, Eastern Europe does assist Moscow by extending economic and military aid to Third World regimes and by supporting Soviet positions in international forums. Yet when it comes to relations with the West--detente with Western Europe and the United States--Eastern Europe, or to be more precise Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, remains a major handicap. The 1955 "Spirit of Geneva" ended on the streets of Budapest, President Johnson's scheduled visit to Moscow was cancelled when the Warsaw Pact forces invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968, and U.S.-Soviet relations, including economic relations, further worsened after the Polish crackdown in 1981. Rightly or wrongly, Soviet intentions towards the West are still judged in part by the way Moscow treats its allies in Eastern Europe.

Yet, and despite all the costs, burdens, and handicaps the empire has come to incur, there are no signs indicating that the Soviet Union is seriously reconsidering its policies towards, or position in, Eastern Europe. Although Western scholars and observers occasionally speak of the "decline" and even the eventual "breakup" of the empire--no doubt drawing on the history of Western empires--for the time being such forecasts may amount to no more

than wishful thinking. As Seweryn Bialer has recently noted, the Polish crisis reaffirms "the unswerving Soviet determination to secure its dominion whatever the cost"; more generally, "empires do not disintegrate when the metropolitan power is at the peak of [its] military strength." Or, as Vernon V. Aspaturian has put it, "Eastern Europe is an asset which Moscow will defend with capabilities sufficient to overcome any means that can be mustered by the Western Alliance."

II.

Yet Soviet policy towards Eastern Europe has become more flexible than it used to be, and these are the main manifestations of such flexibility:

First, the Soviet empire is increasingly decentralized. Decisions of some magnitude are locally made, leaving Moscow with the option of responding to decisions ex post facto. If the communist parties of the region are not autonomous from Moscow, as they are not, they have acquired considerable leeway and corresponding responsibility for ensuring stability at least in part on the basis of local circumstances.

Second, all signs point to Soviet tolerance in the economic realm in particular. Surely Moscow would not accept, say, the reintroduction of a capitalist economy in Czechoslovakia; however, the scope of economic experimentation is now allowed to be quite wide, presumably in order to reduce the Soviet economic burden and in order to create appropriate conditions for consumerism--"goulash communism"--that would remove the edge of popular discontent.

Third, Soviet policy towards Eastern Europe is increasingly marked by a high degree of differentiation. That which Romania can do, in the sphere of foreign policy deviations, Poland

presumably could not; that which Hungary can do, in the spheres of personal freedoms and economic reform, Czechoslovakia presumably could not. Why Romania and Hungary are beneficiaries of the Soviet policy of differentiation may be due to their relatively unimportant strategic location, the political skills of their leaders, the inaccessibility of their languages, or certain traditions in their respective political cultures, too, but their policies reflect on Soviet policies as well.

Notwithstanding such signs of Soviet flexibility--expressed, primarily though not exclusively in the policies and processes of decentralization within the empire, particular tolerance towards localized economic decision-making, and a differentiated approach to the region's several states--Moscow continues to insist on East European proximity to certain Soviet values, patterns, and goals of state behavior:

First, it remains imperative for each Communist Party to maintain its "leading role." This is so not only because it is dictated by Leninist ideology, but because the vested interests of the East European party bureaucracies offer the likelihood of loyalty to the Soviet Union as much as they guarantee that whatever change or reform takes root in Eastern Europe will be controlled "from above" by those whose power depends on the Soviet connection.

Second, it remains imperative for each Communist Party to allow local security forces under its supervision to be controlled by Soviet security forces. The balance of guidance, supervision, and control between the KGB and the Soviet military security forces on the one hand and an East European Communist Party on the other varies from country to country, but whatever evidence there is

about Soviet/East European domestic (and foreign) intelligence suggests Soviet domination of such activities, not dissimilar from that which prevailed during Stalin's last years.

Third, it remains imperative for each Communist Party to participate in the activities of such Soviet-led multilateral institutions as the Warsaw Pact and COMECON. Its well-known difficulties and even failures in this realm notwithstanding, Moscow has shown no signs of cancelling or shelving the objective of economic and military integration.

III.

Thus, Soviet policy toward Eastern Europe in the 1980's reflects the changing balance of costs and benefits of empire-maintenance. Increasing costs have led to a revision of ~~sat~~ellite relations, if not to a revision of the political mentality that informs those relations, but so far the revision has signified a Soviet attempt to employ different--more flexible, more tolerant--means to ensure the survival of the Soviet empire.

To place the significance of changing relations in perspective, it should be kept in mind that the Soviet Union has pursued two contradictory goals in the region. First, Moscow expects a degree of cohesion and conformity within the bloc; second, it seeks stability and order in Eastern Europe. These goals are contradictory because, in almost all cases, the more Moscow insists on cohesion and conformity the more instability it is likely to generate. Conversely, the more it allows the East European regimes to adopt measures that can lead to stability (i.e., measures

stressing consumerism or nationalism or both) the more Eastern Europe will have to distance itself from Soviet patterns and policies.

The Soviet leaders have shown themselves unprepared to choose between cohesion and stability; both constitute essential needs.

Cohesion is needed to justify forty years of Soviet history and to uphold the notion of the irreversibility of historical development. More importantly, cohesion is one of the few pillars of the Soviet leadership's claim to domestic legitimacy in that it offers proof of the Soviet regime's achievements against the background of economic stagnation, political immobility, and only limited foreign policy successes outside Eastern Europe.

On the other hand, East European stability is needed in order to allow the successful pursuit of other foreign and even domestic Soviet objectives. For in the absence of regional stability, the Soviet Union is compelled either to bail out economically or to protect militarily unpopular regimes, resorting in either case to costly measures which invariably retard the pursuit of other Soviet objectives both at home and especially abroad.

Deferring as it always has the real choice between cohesion and stability, the Soviet leadership has only and always preferred to tilt in one direction or another, at times stressing the goal of cohesion, at other times the goal of stability. The difference can be, and has been, significant, but in no case does it amount

to the systemic transformation of the empire.

IV.

Under what circumstances can the Soviet Union be expected to tilt in the direction of the goal of stability and hence allow consumerist or nationalist departures from Soviet norms? Under what circumstances can the Soviet Union be expected to show more flexibility in its treatment of Eastern Europe? There are three current answers to these questions which, together or separately, may shed light on circumstances that shape Soviet policy toward Eastern Europe.

One school of thought explains Soviet policy primarily in terms of Soviet economic stringencies. In this view, as the economic cost of maintaining the empire increases, Moscow is compelled to make concessions--reduce the burden by allowing for economic and to a lesser extent political experimentation in Eastern Europe, perhaps on the Hungarian pattern, despite the political dangers inherent in such experimentation. The point of tolerating economic experimentation is to make Eastern Europe self-sufficient (vis-a-vis the Soviet Union, that is) and hence (presumably) more stable politically.

Another school of thought explains Soviet policy in terms of Soviet leadership characteristics. In this view, only when there is a strong Soviet leader--when an arbiter is chosen by his colleagues to preside over the struggle for power at the top--only then can Moscow make the decision to be more accommodating. Under such circumstances prevailing in Moscow, it is said, the East European leaders will feel more free to initiate economic reforms or uphold nationalist symbols in order to obtain a degree

of popular support and hence political stability. (The course of Soviet-American relations during the past thirty years gives credence to the idea that only a fairly strong and secure Soviet leader can implement fresh initiatives in foreign policy.)

A third school of thought explains the chances for Soviet flexibility, and hence for a policy stressing East European stability, in a way completely different from the previous one. In this view, it is during an intense succession struggle at the top of the Soviet leadership--before and after a strong arbiter is chosen--when the East European regimes can obtain the necessary room for maneuver. When, in a very real sense, the Soviet leaders are preoccupied with themselves, it is argued, they will either tend to pay somewhat less attention to Eastern Europe, or emphasize stability for the time being, or send different policy signals to competing East European factions. In either case, the result is change of the type that at first may well entail elite tension--but then lead to popular reforms the Soviet Union may or may not accept.

Although all three explanations are plausible, the past seems to support the third explanation more than it does the others. Invariably, East European regimes have sought to introduce, or have been forced to allow, measures of "liberalization" at a time when the Soviet leadership was in a period of transition. During the acute post-Stalin power struggle in Moscow (1953-57), intra-party infighting in Poland and Hungary paved the way to popular uprisings. During the 1963-70 period--when Khrushchev's opponents succeeded in ousting him but did not yet give Brezhnev all the authority his predecessor had had from 1957 to 1963--the Romanians

opted for a semi-nationalist course and Czechoslovakia tried to develop its "socialism with a human face." From 1980 or so to the present--given Brezhnev's and Andropov's illness, several East European leaders' explicit alignment with either Andropov (Kadar) or Chernenko (Ceausescu and Husak), and the striking hesitancy and vacillation displayed by three consecutive Polish regimes--it has been quite clear that the Soviet leadership's preoccupation with two successions has significantly contributed to that sense of uncertainty, maneuverings, and diversity that has come to characterize much of East Europe today, including even the German Democratic Republic. Now, as much as in the past, the external source of such uncertainty and diversity may be identified as the divisive leadership struggle that occupies the proprietors of power in the Kremlin.

V.

As the Soviet leaders try to muddle through in the years ahead, they will find themselves overwhelmed by the gathering storm--growing economic and political pressures and expectations--in Eastern Europe. Add to these pressures and expectations the prospect for leadership change in every one of the countries of Eastern Europe in three to five years or so. Even if the Soviet leaders continue to be flexible and tolerant (which is far from certain), even if they continue to play down the goal of cohesion and stress the goal of stability--tilting in that direction may not be enough. The availability of consumer goods and the

manipulation of national symbols (i.e., successes in space, sports, and the military competition) may buy stability in the Soviet Union; in Eastern Europe, the expectations are both higher and different. Andropov was said to have understood at least the difference between the requirements for stability in the Soviet Union on the one hand and in Eastern Europe on the other; his successors probably do not.

Accordingly, the most likely course the Soviet leadership under Chernenko will adopt in the rest of the 1980's will consist of variations on the old theme. Moscow will seek to maintain its empire by economic aid and decentralization if possible, by interventions if necessary. Only the expectation of a general, area-wide confrontation between all or most of Eastern Europe on the one hand and the Soviet Union on the other would shake Soviet complacency and compel Moscow to consider the Finlandization of Eastern Europe. Short of that rather unlikely prospect, the Soviet Union will continue to treat Eastern Europe the way it has done since the mid-1950's--despite the increasing costs and burdens of its empire--because pressure from only one country or one regime at a time for a larger measure of autonomy and the expansion of personal freedoms--in other words, pressure for conditions that could lead to stability--is not sufficient to prompt a Soviet reconsideration of the utility of maintaining the Soviet empire in its present form in Eastern Europe.