

IN EASTERN EUROPE, THIS TIME THE U.S. MUST BE PREPARED

Eastern Europe is in turmoil. Polish workers once again are on strike and Hungary is ousting its long-entrenched Communist Party leader, Janos Kadar. Having failed in four decades to legitimize themselves and obtain even minimal acceptance from their peoples, the Soviet-installed and Soviet-propped communist regimes seem to be in for a very difficult period. As this develops, United States policy makers this time should be prepared to deal with the situation and use the events to enhance Western security and Eastern freedom. There is no excuse for Washington to be surprised by events as it was in 1953 in East Germany, 1956 in Poland and Hungary, 1968 in Czechoslovakia, and in 1970 and 1980 in Poland. Top U.S. decision makers should: give the events in Eastern Europe the highest priority; push the issue to the forefront of the agenda of this month's U.S.-Soviet Moscow summit; monitor the situation closely; and prepare, in extensive consultations with allies, a wide range of responses to possible situations.

Prone to Explosion. The current crisis, of course, is not unexpected. Last winter brought an almost incessant stream of protests in Eastern Europe: Czechs demanded religious freedoms, Hungarians democracy, East Germans the right to emigrate, and Polish students academic freedom. Even usually docile Romanians protested — against hunger and wage cuts. What makes the current situation especially prone to an explosion is a confluence of all the factors that produced such explosions in the past: political uncertainty caused by generational leadership change (Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, East Germany); economic downturn after relative prosperity (Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia), and confusing signals from a Kremlin going through a period of reforms and leadership squabbles.

The situation is aggravated by Eastern Europe's mounting debt to the West, totalling \$90.6 billion, and the Soviet economic crisis. Both factors make pacification through economic assistance — bought either with Soviet grants (Hungary after 1956 and Czechoslovakia after 1968) or Western loans (Poland after 1970) — highly unlikely. Finally, Eastern Europe in the past seems to have taken its cue from Poland, the region's most populous and defiant country. The current strikes there thus may herald nationwide unrest, which could spread to neighboring countries. The Polish strikes in December of 1970, for example, triggered unrest in the East German port of Rostock.

Losing Eastern Europe. A U.S. policy toward Eastern Europe today could be more effective than it was during earlier periods of unrest. This is because of the potential costs of intervention, direct or indirect, for Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. While Gorbachev undoubtedly wants to preserve the Soviet empire as much as did his predecessors (and knows that a

General Secretary who appears to be "losing" Eastern Europe will most certainly lose his position as well), this time, he may perceive domestic and international costs of intervention as prohibitive. Soviet intervention in Eastern Europe, for example, would alienate the Soviet intelligentsia, the only social group in Soviet society on whose allegiance Gorbachev can now count. As after the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, crushing East European revolt today would drive the intellectuals back to demoralization, cynicism, and active opposition to the regime.

Perhaps more important, Soviet intervention in Eastern Europe could destroy most, if not all, of the good will in the West that Gorbachev has been cultivating. Such intervention could jeopardize the current Soviet modernization plans, which hinge on Western assistance (as have all such plans throughout Soviet history). This could spell an end to Gorbachev's efforts to pull the country out of deepening economic and social crisis. Faced with such consequences, even the hardest of the Soviet hard-liners may pause before deciding to intervene.

It is here that American ability to assume, articulate, and communicate a credible policy becomes crucial. Eastern Europe should be at the top of the American agenda at the Moscow summit. Gorbachev should be warned of the consequences of intervention — whether direct via an invasion, as in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, or indirect, through intimidation and military coups and martial law declared by quislings, as in Poland in 1981. Reagan should tell Gorbachev that the U.S. (and allied) response will be a grain embargo, abrogation of cultural and economic agreements with the Soviet Union, immediate and total cessation of lending to the Soviet Union by West European and American banks and governments, a recall of Western ambassadors from the Soviet Union, and an appropriate degree of military alert of the NATO forces.

Moral Support. The U.S. and its West European and Japanese allies now should start developing a crisis-management infrastructure that can be activated on short notice. The planning should include development of diplomatic, economic, political, and military options. In the meantime, the U.S. should persistently, publicly, and at the highest levels voice concern about possible Soviet intervention and convey moral support for the peoples of Eastern Europe's struggle for democracy. Eastern Europe always has been the ultimate test of Soviet international behavior. Nothing in the current U.S.-Soviet relations should be more important: not arms control, not "regional conflicts," not bilateral agreements. The Cold War was born in Eastern Europe. The U.S. should challenge the Soviet Union to end the Cold War by turning its "new political thinking" from declaration to reality.

A well-thought out, articulated, and credible American position may tip the scales, prevent a Soviet intervention, and allow Eastern Europe a first step on the road to national self-determination.

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For further information:

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Michael Kraus, "Soviet Policy toward East Europe," *Current History*, November 1987, pp. 353-356.

Charles Gati, "Gorbachev and Eastern Europe," *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1987.