

EASTERN EUROPE: Where life is not so good, yet not so bad

by Richard C. Longworth

Before, if a person got an exit visa, as often as not he defected. Now almost everybody comes back.

—a teacher in Warsaw.

We have different ideas and habits than the Russians do—that's all. It's not in their interest to make a big deal out of it. Their main interest is law and order—and we've got that.

—a journalist in Budapest.

It's not that we're without hope. But we know we must wait—and we don't know for how long.

—a housewife in Prague.

These dissimilar attitudes—optimism in Poland, confidence in Hungary, resignation in Czechoslovakia—differentiate the countries that the world has long lumped together as “the Soviet bloc.” This term always was unfair: The six East European nations allied to Russia—Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, East Germany, and Bulgaria—are as different as Scotland and Italy. It is even less fair today, when the area is experiencing basic changes. When I traveled recently through Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Romania, I found signs that Eastern Europe has entered a new era. Twenty-five years after seizure of control, Russia has stopped trying to dictate the details of cultural, political, and economic life there, much less trying to make these details conform to the Soviet model. Instead, Moscow has issued two broad guidelines to its ideological neighbors—that each country remain recognizably Communist and that each keep the peace, enabling Russia to attend to China, détente, and its own problems, undistracted by riots or by other unpleasantness. The kind of communism and the form of peacekeeping is largely a matter of local option.

This edict, obviously, implies some-

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thing less than parliamentary democracy. In fact, it does not necessarily promise improvements. Hungary and Poland are increasing personal liberties and raising living standards, while hewing to Soviet foreign policy. Czechoslovakia, still jumpy after the 1968 invasion, promotes prosperity but keeps a rigid rein on politics at home and kowtows to Moscow abroad. Romania continues the noisy independence from Russia that has won it a good press in the West—and the less-publicized political repression and misguided industrialization that make it the most Stalinist and poorest nation in Eastern Europe. I did not visit Bulgaria and East Germany on this trip, but going by my past experience there, I can believe reports that these two—the former the most pro-Russian bloc nation, the latter the least trusted—remain docile.

The point, then, is not that these nations are evolving in ways pleasing to either the West or Russia. It is that they are evolving in their own way, at their own pace. If this trend continues, it will be seen as Eastern Europe's third distinct era since the war. The first was the Stalin years, when Russia moved in, installed its own viceroys, looted its new “allies,” and liquidated any nay-sayers. Stalin's death in 1953 and uprisings in Hungary and Poland in 1956 ended this period and ushered in the Khrushchev era—a time of uncertain reforms, hesitant progress, and panicky retreats. With the Kremlin wavering, the East Europeans began experimenting, testing limits.

There was nothing new in this experimentation. East Europeans have been doing it for centuries. The area between the Baltic and Black seas is, historically, a breakwater against which wave after wave of invasions from the East—of Turk and Tartar, of Russian czar and

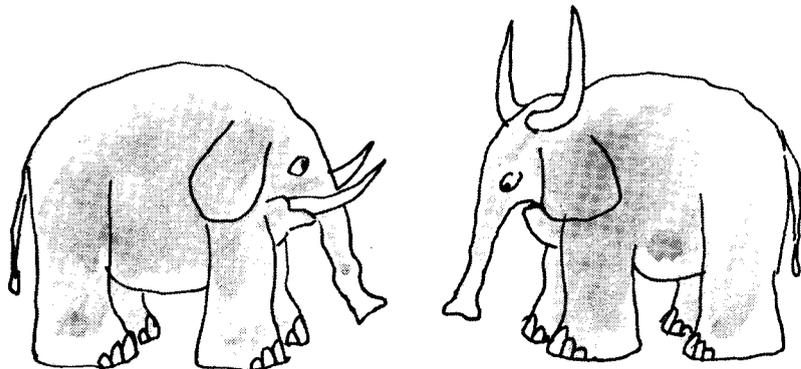
Soviet commissar—have beaten and been absorbed. Protected by this “seawall,” the nations of the West have been able to develop their remarkable civilization. It is a debt to Eastern Europe that we seldom acknowledge.

The most successful experimenting during the Khrushchev era took place in Hungary. But it was the Prague Spring and the subsequent Soviet invasion that ended the era, by showing the limits of reform only too clearly. Then, two years later, Polish workers rioted because of low pay and high prices. Both events demonstrated the failure of Soviet policy in Eastern Europe. The Russians, it seems now, responded by telling leaders there to do something about it. Anything—but quickly.

THE RESULTS of this order are only now becoming visible. One is a consumer boom in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland after a quarter-century of backwardness. Housing, still a major problem, is a priority item. More and better food is available. Clothing has caught up with the West in styles—if not in quality. Poles and Czechs are buying their own homes, and the cobbled squares of Prague and Budapest are filled with Eastern-made cars bearing such names as Wartburg, Dacia, Skoda, Zhigali, and Polski Fiat.

The Eastern nations have plugged their economies into the West's. Hungary, Poland, and Romania all do half their trade with Western nations. They import equipment and processes from the West, using loans to be paid off with goods produced by this equipment. Romania pioneered this method; but when its industry failed to rise to Western standards, it went so deeply into debt that it must now export badly

(Continued on page 52.)



S. GROSS

“My mother was frightened by a water buffalo.”

The Rise of Middle Class Activism: FIGHTING "CITY HALL"

by Roger M. Williams

In January ABC-TV introduced what the world scarcely needs—another situation comedy. This one, however, is a barometer of something besides our lamentable tastes in television. The program is called "Karen," and its heroine lives near Washington, D.C., and works for a Common Cause-like organization. She is sophisticated, middle-class, and, above all, "involved." Even if "Karen" fails its Nielsen test, ABC should be credited with spotting a significant trend in American life: the growth, in numbers and importance, of public interest groups whose driving forces are the discontent and pent-up energies of the middle class.

From Common Cause to small-city consumer groups, from Nader task forces to local professionals working *pro bono publico*, from housewives angry at children's television in Massachusetts to retired people angry at unbridled growth in Colorado, volunteers are banding together to assault the system. They are overwhelmingly middle-class in background and outlook. By the standards of the Sixties, they are unrecognizable as protesters; their dress is neat, their tone moderate, their battlegrounds indoors, not out. Their goals are equally remote from the Sixties. Instead of peace, civil rights, and an end to poverty, the goals are consumer protection, auto and airplane safety, limited growth, pure food, clean air and water, cleaner politics, and especially "accountability"—a term, now almost a cliché, that translates broadly into, "This is bad. Who's gonna fix it?"

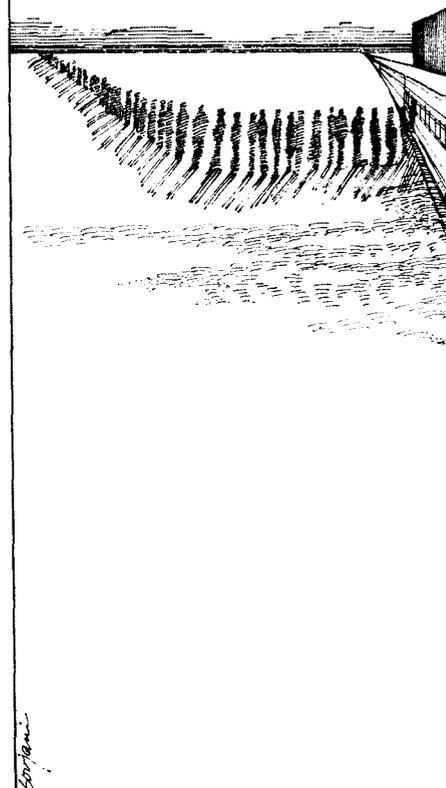
One of the most striking "fixit" groups of late has been Citizens for Colorado's Future (C.C.F.), which in the fall of 1972 accomplished the nearly unbelievable feat of keeping the 1976 winter Olympic Games out of Colorado. Faced with the bring-the-games boosterism of business and political leaders, C.C.F. mobilized suburbanites, environmentalists, retired people, and students—almost all of them white, middle-class, and previously uninvolved in public controversy. They rounded up 88,000 signa-

tures to get the Olympics issue on the statewide ballot and then passionately argued their case: that the Olympics would bring unwanted growth and environmental blight and that the money to stage such a show could be put to better uses. The proposed \$5 million state outlay for the games was voted down by a ratio of almost five to three.

C.C.F. organizer John Parr says that its surprise strength came largely from "a new group of activists—suburban housewives and their professional or executive husbands. A lot of them told us, 'I've been afraid to get involved like this before.'" C.C.F.'s chief spokesman, state representative Michael D. Lamm, rode the Olympics issue (and others of his own making) into the governor's office last fall. His campaign organization was staffed and substantially financed by veterans of the anti-Olympics drive.*

ORGANIZED PROTEST is not new to the American middle class—members of the Townsend Movement of the Thirties and the Women's Christian Temperance Union, as well as the early feminists, were certainly middle-class—but it is new on this scale. Except perhaps for the Revolutionary period, organized protest has never reached so deeply into middle-class ranks and involved such a broad range of issues. The protest has made maximum use of the things the middle class does best: organize, propagandize, and work like hell. The press release, the telephone network, and the fold-and-stamp brigade—tools of sales organizations and the Junior League—have been turned loose on government officials and businessmen and anybody else who is "accountable" but not behaving that way. Says Jack Conway, until recently president of Common Cause: "The Sixties was minority politics. Now we are playing majority politics, because inside the majority is where the decisions are made."

*Also elected last fall, to Congress, was Toby Moffett, a former "Raider" for Ralph Nader and a leader of Connecticut Citizens Action.



Illustrations: John Sovjani

Not everyone is delighted with the new middle-class activism. Labor unions suspect middle-class motives and resent the elevation of environmental and military-spending issues to the detriment of their own traditional concerns, such as job security. Some reformers say the new groups tend to overlook the critical issues. (Says a believer in revenue-sharing as a critical issue: "Those people who fret over children's TV are too much. Why don't they just pull the plug and get to work on something important?") The most serious criticism is that the middle-class groups are not public-interested, but self-interested, elitist in operation and outlook. "Public interest is a middle-class exercise," is the way Anthony Mazzochi of the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers put it not long ago.

The last criticism, at least, is sound, and the most candid of the public interest group spokesmen acknowledge its validity. Environmentalists are especially open to the charge. "They don't simply want to keep the brook clean," a friendly critic observes. "They want to keep other people from fishing in it."

The question is whether middle-class motives, even those of earnest liberals,