

Eastern Europe's Great Transition: Two Status Reports

It's been just over five years since Communism began its precipitous collapse in central and eastern Europe and major reforms were initiated across the old Soviet empire. In this span some excellent opinion research has been conducted in the region, giving us yet another important means of viewing the great transition.

Here we present two reports, one by Richard Rose and Christian Haerper based on their polling in central and eastern Europe, the other by Albert Motivans from surveys conducted by the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute. Both describe a situation where the economic side of the transition is generally painful, though unevenly so from country to country. On the political side, Rose and Haerper find a more hopeful picture—but again with sharp country differences, with the Czech Republic at one pole and Ukraine and Belarus at the other. Overall, relatively few want to go back to the old order and many view the future of the new order with optimism.

Endorsing the “Churchill Hypothesis”

By Richard Rose and Christian Haerper

Ideas in the abstract can be dangerous, because they are beautiful but unattainable. This is particularly true of big political ideas, for ideologies can justify the murder of millions. East Europeans know this, for they have lived for half a century under the scourge of Nazism and then Communism.¹ An idealistic conception of democracy is dangerous too, if it is used irresponsibly: that is, if a person argues that democracy has “failed” because it is imperfect. This is not a sign of failure but of life in a world where many things, including government, are imperfect.

The argument for democracy is not that it is perfect but that it is preferable to Communism, fascism and the home grown dictatorships to which East Europeans were accustomed. Winston Churchill stated the argument for democracy in its most succinct form:

Many forms of government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government, except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.²

The Test of Experience

Comparison is central to the Churchill hypothesis: We should not compare our present system of government with an abstract ideal but with other systems of government as they are actually experienced. For East Europeans, Communism was a reality, not an ideal. The party's Marxist-Leninist values were not refuted by debate in the marketplace of ideas but by firsthand experience in marketplaces across half a continent, as Communism failed to deliver the goods.

Only after the Berlin Wall fell could East Europeans begin to experience democracy. The past five years have enabled

continues on page 4

Struggling Unevenly Toward A New Economic Future

By Albert Motivans

A wave of popular discontent has swept across Central and Eastern Europe as voters have returned many former Communists to power in parliamentary elections in Hungary, Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania and Russia. This turnaround has revealed widespread public dissatisfaction with the economic decline which has accompanied the first years of reform.

These election results have been widely interpreted as a signal to leaders to place greater policy emphasis on the social welfare of the population, though it has not necessarily implied a complete reversal of political or economic policies. In the course of the economic transition in Central Europe, popular expectations for reform have started to flag. Nevertheless, the election results have come as a surprise in Hungary and Poland where macroeconomic indicators have recently shown signs of stabilization. Even reformers in the Czech Republic, one of the most successful in the transition from a planned to a market economy, have not been immune from criticism.

In the Slavic countries of Eastern Europe, the election results were generally perceived as a protest against reformers, especially since there has been a more vocal ideological opposition to elements of market reform. However, it should be noted that in Belarus and Ukraine serious reform has yet to begin. In these countries, the election results may be more a reflection of the loss of confidence in political leaders who had failed to come to grips with the deepening economic and social crisis.

Each of the Baltic countries has taken a different path. While Estonia has met with some success in the transition to a market economy, Lithuania was one of the first countries to return to reform-Communists after several years of economic stagnation. In Latvia, public concern over the economy has been overshadowed to some degree by the political debate over citizenship legislation.

continues on page 5

Figure 1
Rating Political Regimes:
Past, Present, Future

Question: Here is a scale for ranking **how government works**. The top, plus 100, is the best; the bottom, minus 100, the worst. Where on this scale would you put...the former Communist regime...our present system of governing with free elections and many parties...our system of governing in five years time?

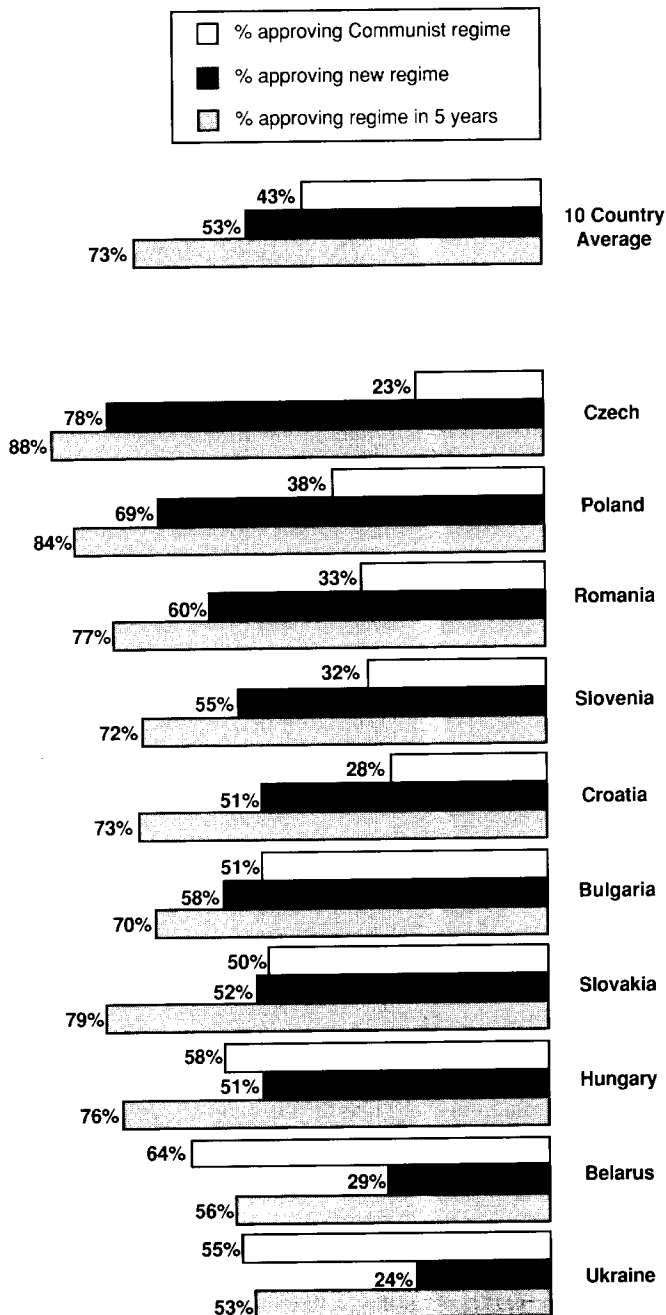
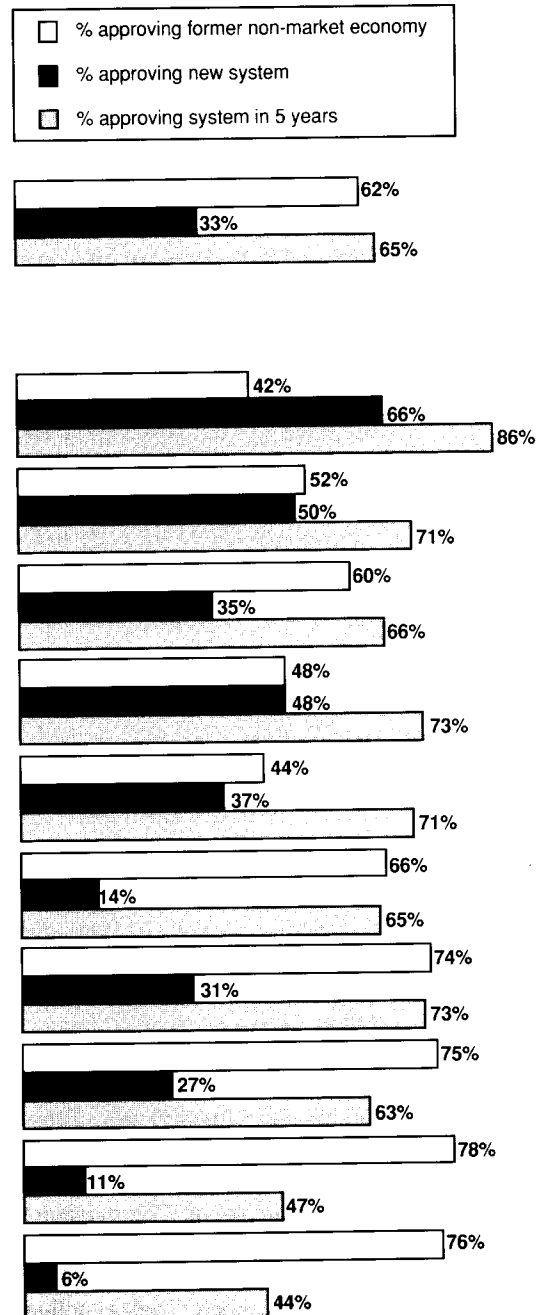


Figure 2
Rating Economic Systems:
Past, Present, Future

Question: Here is a scale for ranking **how the economy works**. The top, plus 100, is the best; the bottom, minus 100, the worst. Where on this scale would you put...the socialist economy before the revolution of 1989...our present economic system...our economic system in five years time?



Note: Overall approval ratings are average responses over zero on the heaven/hell scale.

Source: Paul Lazarsfeld Society, Vienna, *New Democracies Barometer III*. A multi-national survey conducted between late November 1993 and early April 1994, sponsored by the Austrian Federal Ministry for Science and Research and the Austrian National Bank. For full details, see R. Rose and Christian Haerpfer, *New Democracies Barometer III* (Glasgow: Strathclyde Studies in Public Policy, No. 230).

Rose & Haerpfer—continued

people to see what Churchill meant when he referred to government in “a world of sin and woe.” Democracy is not necessarily in the hands of idealists; it can also give office to vodka-drinking amateurs and overnight converts with a *nomenklatura* past.

Today, citizens of the new democracies in Eastern Europe are able to compare two very different political systems: government under socialism, and a democracy as it actually is and not as described in abstract philosophy.

Under Communist rule, there was no such thing as public opinion; statements about the views of the masses were official statements consistent with Communist orthodoxies. The mass of the people kept their opinions of the regime private.³ Today, the abolition of censorship, the proliferation of media and political parties and the removal of border guards make it possible for people to say what they think in front of strangers, a prime requirement for conducting public opinion surveys.

Since democracy cannot exist unless people freely support it, the Paul Lazarsfeld Society, Vienna, has established the New Democracies Barometer (NDB), a unique cross-national program of surveys monitoring political attitudes, economic and social behavior in ten post-Communist societies: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, the Slovak Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Croatia, Belarus and Ukraine.⁴ The countries vary in the extent of their advance to democracy: Freedom House rates five countries as free and five as partly free.⁵ Equally important, all have made big advances toward freedom in the past five years.

What People Think of the Old Regime

The evaluation of a constitutional regime is very different from measuring the popularity of particular politicians or parties, or satisfaction with the current state of a market economy. Such measures refer to attitudes within an established democratic system; they do not evaluate it by comparison with alternatives. In Eastern Europe, every respondent has had direct experience with at least two very different political

regimes and economic systems.

Because of the critical importance of dissatisfaction with an authoritarian and inefficient past, the NDB surveys have created a “heaven/hell” scale. This scale asks people to rate political and economic systems on a range from +100, total satisfaction, to -100, total dissatisfaction, with 0 the neutral midpoint. This provides a richer sense of the intensity and direction of public opinion than a standard 1 to 10 scale.⁶

When regimes are in the process of transition, it is important to know in what direction people see things heading. Thus, the NDB surveys systematically ask for evaluations of the old Communist regime, present experiences, and hopes and fears for the future. Insofar as the past is assessed as totally unsatisfactory, then moderate dis-

It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government, except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time

satisfaction with the present becomes evidence of relative improvement.

When asked to rate the former Communist regime, East Europeans divide: the majority are negative, but 43% give a positive rating (see Figure 1, p.4). In Belarus and Ukraine a majority endorse the old regime because they believe they were better off being part of the Soviet Union. In Hungary the positive endorsement reflects the fact that the old regime was not so much based on repression as on hypocrisy. In Janos Kadar's phrase, “He who is not against us is with us.”

When people are asked to rate the former economic system, the overall pattern is positive: 62% give a favorable rating (see Figure 2, p.4). The three countries where this is not done include the Czech Republic and Slovenia, now two of the most prosperous economies in the region.

When East Europeans look back on their Communist past, they are divided: a

majority are positive about the Communist planned economy and negative about the one-party state. The average East European is cross-pressured, liking the security of the old economy but rejecting the repressive features that went with it politically.

Comparing Past and Present

Because the media are concerned with today's events, headline news concentrates upon what the new governments of Eastern Europe are doing. With bad news making bigger headlines, headlines often feature what the regimes are doing wrong. But when East Europeans evaluate their lives, they do so in the light of a lifetime of Communism.

East Europeans can tell the difference between past and present where it matters most: People now feel much freer in their daily lives (see Table 1). When the NDB asked people to compare conditions under their new system with the Communist regime on six different measures of freedom, the only difference in responses was the size of the majority saying they felt freer since the fall of Communism. Instead of being lectured about the dangers of religion as the “opiate of the people,” people decide for themselves whether or not to attend church. Instead of being forced to take part in the “non-politics” of the Communist Party, people now have the right to turn off from politics. The right to travel is now virtually unrestricted.

The biggest gains in freedom are not in the societies closest to Western standards but in societies that Communists dragged toward Oriental despotism, such as Romania. There nine-tenths now feel freer than in Ceausescu's regime. The appreciation of greater freedom is least where new regimes have yet to establish democratic credentials, such as Belarus and Ukraine. Yet even there, three-quarters feel freer today to say what they think, join any organization or make up their own minds about religion.

When people are asked to rate their new political system, the majority are positive. Especially positive are the people of the Czech Republic and Poland, where repression had been harsh under an adverse

Table 1
Increased Freedoms in East European New Democracies

Question: Please think of the difference between the old system of government under the Communists and our present democratic system...Please tell me whether you think our present political system, by comparison with the Communist, is much better, somewhat better, equal, somewhat worse, much worse...everybody is free to say what he or she thinks...people can join any organization they want...can travel and live wherever they want...people can live without fear of unlawful arrest...each person can decide whether or not to take an interest in politics...everybody is free to decide whether or not to practice a religion.

(Percent responding better now than under Communist regime)

	Free speech	Can join organizations	Free to travel	No fear of arrest	Take interest in politics	Free to decide own religion
10 County Avg.	80%	84%	72%	62%	74%	86%
Bulgaria	90	95	95	88	97	98
Czech Republic	84	90	96	73	84	94
Slovakia	82	88	87	62	81	96
Hungary	73	81	75	59	69	83
Poland	83	79	75	71	92	70
Romania	94	94	90	81	59	95
Croatia	66	78	42	53	57	72
Slovenia	74	82	62	54	65	77
Belarus	73	75	49	37	60	87
Ukraine	79	76	49	42	---	84

Source: Paul Lazarsfeld Society, *New Democracies Barometer III*.

Communist regime. The overall average is greatly depressed by the ratings given by Belarussians and Ukrainians. If these two former Soviet republics are excluded as atypical, then 61% endorse the new political system in the eight new democracies, compared to 39% endorsing their old Communist regime.

When people are asked about the new economic system, which has delivered inflation and rising unemployment as well as new goods to the shops, the majority are negative. Only 33% endorse the economy in transition, a drop of 29 percentage points from those who endorsed the non-market economy.

East Europeans continue to have a mixed view of their world, but the mix is different than before. Today, the average East European is positive about the political system and negative about the economy. Combining the evaluations that people give about the past and present political systems yields a fourfold typology of responses to transformation.⁷

**Democrats* (disapprove Communist re-

gime, approve new: 33%). This is the largest and most positive group. Their average rating of the old regime on the heaven/hell scale was -58; their average rating of the new regime is +44.

**Skeptics* (disapprove both regimes: 24%). Churchill's view of democracy was realistic; he endorsed it as a lesser evil. Skeptics view their present political system negatively. But the good news is that they tend to view the old Communist regime as even worse, placing it 13 points lower (-46) on the scale.

**Compliant* (approve both Communist, new regimes: 21%). Given a history of authoritarian pressures to bow to the powerful, it is not surprising that some East Europeans will endorse both old and new regimes. The average rating is almost identical for the Communist regime (+47) compared with the current system (+45).

**Reactionaries* (approve Communist regime, dislike new: 23%). This group is the mirror image of the democrats, the average rating for the Communist regime is +60 and the rating for the new regime is -46. It

differs in being almost a third smaller in size than the democrats.

If Belarus and Ukraine, which hold strong Communist sentiment, are excluded from the above typology, democrats rise to 38% and reactionaries fall to 17%. The proportion of skeptics and of compliants remains much the same.

One reason that more East Europeans are not positive about their new democratic market system is that it has inherited a big legacy of problems from the Communists. The majority of people recognize this. When people are asked if they think it will take years for government to deal with the problems inherited from the Communists, 62% say yes. They are also uncertain as to when their hopes for a higher standard of living will be met. Less than one in five expect to be satisfied before the millennium, one in six say they will never be satisfied, and the largest group, 39%, "don't know."

Future Hopeful, Not Fearful

Hope and fear are the two emotions driving East Europeans today. The pessi-

Rose & Haerpfer—continued

mists fear what may happen in the future while the optimists hope that the costs of abandoning one system for another will produce benefits.

Five years is a very long time in the life of an East European. That was the span of the oldest generation's experience of world war. Five years ago NDB respondents could not have been asked the questions reported here—for Communist regimes were still in place. Hence, questions about rating the political and economic systems ask people what they imagine conditions will be like in five years.

East Europeans are very positive about the political future: 73% give a positive rating to the system as they expect it to evolve. This is 30 percentage points higher than those approving the old Communist regime. Even in Belarus and Ukraine a majority are positive.

Expectations of the future throw fresh light upon reactionaries. If this group expects the future to be worse than the present and the past, then Eastern Europe is headed for political polarization, with a fifth of the population becoming increasingly anti-democracy. Alternatively, skeptics who are currently negative may simply be laggards, slow to accept the new regime because of an attachment to the old or doubts about the performance of the new system.

In fact, those who are not currently in favor of the new political system are laggards rather than confirmed anti-democrats. The average reactionary expects to come around to support the new regime, and so too does the average skeptic. While neither group shows strong enthusiasm, they definitely are prepared to turn around, with reactionaries raising their evaluation of the regime in the future by 48 points on the heaven/hell scale, and skeptics, by 52 points.

Expectations of the future economy are positive too; 65% expect it to be satisfactory in five years, and as many as 86% in the Czech Republic. Only in Belarus and Ukraine are optimists in a minority. Sixty-seven percent is still not as high as the proportion endorsing democracy (73%), but it is high enough to show that there is

support for the double transformation of societies into a democracy *and* a market economy.

What About the Alternatives?

By definition every East European has lived under at least two very different political regimes, and in several countries some have lived under three or four, as the flood of history has swept past them. Hence, it is perfectly meaningful for the NDB to ask East Europeans whether they think they would be better off with another system of government. The answers showed a great deal of discrimination.

The average East European is cross-pressured, liking the security of the old economy but rejecting the repressive features that went with it politically

Communist rule is rejected as an alternative by five-sixths of NDB respondents. In the Czech Republic only 6% say they would prefer a Communist regime to the present system. The highest levels of Communist support are 37% in Belarus, and 24% in Ukraine. In both countries the choice is almost certainly linked with regret for the break-up of the Soviet Union. Since the question asked people to say whether they strongly or somewhat strongly agreed or disagreed, we can also observe a difference in intensity. Only 5% strongly endorsed a return to Communist rule, whereas 58% are strongly against this happening.

In many parts of the world, military rule is an alternative to democracy. Yet only 9% would welcome the army governing their country. The rejection of the military is common across Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. To attract a broad base of support, the alternative to democracy should be another form of civilian rule—but not a monarchy. This is not surprising, for many countries gained national independence after World War I by rejecting the rule of a Habsburg or Prussian Kaiser or a Russian Czar.

The demand for effective leadership is not necessarily undemocratic: it can be heard in every American presidential election and in Western Europe too. Given the history of Eastern Europe, an effective leader may not be a democrat. A third of NDB respondents endorsed a strong leader in preference to a popularly elected parliament. However, only one in seven strongly agreed with the idea of government by a strong leader compared to 43% who strongly disagreed. Moreover, many who are in favor of a strong leader appear to make this choice because they want more effective government; they are not against a democratic regime in principle. And the fact that there is bound to be disagreement—among leaders as well as among followers—about who the leader should be further weakens support for a dictatorship in place of democracy.

The attractions of effective leadership can be rooted in a desire for improved government performance rather than personality. The main problem facing every East European country today is the transformation of the economic system from a command to a market economy. This is often defined by national politicians, international advisors from the IMF and the World Bank and by the economics profession, as a “technical problem.” Elected politicians can let economists make decisions for a mixture of motives: they believe that economics is an applied science, they lack knowledge of what to do, or they want others to carry responsibility for unpopular economic decisions in order to protect their own popularity.

When people are asked if they would like the most important decisions about the economy to be made by experts and not government, agreement shoots up to 72%, showing a very strong desire for a technocratic solution to current economic difficulties. This does not mean that PhDs from MIT are going to supplant commissars as the new ruling elite, for the definition of an expert is pragmatic: a person who can sort out the country's economic problems. No market-oriented economist who has taken office—and a number have tried—has yet been able to establish credentials as a *successful* economic expert.

Rose & Haerpfer—concluded

All in all, East Europeans have a realistic view of the problems confronting them: the economy is a mess and the new system of government has yet to come to grips with these problems. But the good news is that the new democracies of Eastern Europe have abandoned the Communist regime's grip on the everyday lives of the people. The weakness of new regimes is preferred to an overly strong authoritarian system.

The introduction of free competitive elections gives people the chance to express dissatisfaction in the most effective way possible, by voting the government out of office. Like Winston Churchill, East Europeans do not pretend that their new system is "perfect and all-wise," but they do recognize that democracy is a big improvement over what went before.

Endnotes:

¹ The term Eastern Europe is here used in its political, not geographic, sense. It refers to all those lands that were formerly under Soviet domination through the Warsaw Pact military alliance, COMECON trade ties and Communist Party tutelage.

² British House of Commons, *Hansard* (November 11, 1947), col. 206. For an extended statement of a similar argument, see Giovanni Sartori, *The Theory of Democracy Revisited* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1987), pp. 271-75.

³ Elisabeth Noelle-Neuman's *The Spiral of Silence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, 2nd ed.) is a good source on the historical context of "official" opinion in Europe. See also Vladimir Shlapentokh, *The Public and Private Life of the Soviet People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁴ The first NDB survey was undertaken in 1991. The third survey, the source of data for this article, was conducted between November 1993 and March 1994. All interviews are conducted face-to-face with a nationwide stratified sample of approximately one thousand respondents. For full details, see Richard Rose and Christian Haerpfer, *New Democracies Barometer III* (Glasgow: U. of Strathclyde Studies in Public Policy No. 230, 1994). Full details of earlier reports and analyses of the three NDB surveys can be obtained from the Publications Secretary, CSPP, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow G1 1XH, Scotland (Fax: 44-41-552-4711).

⁵ *Freedom Review* (January/February 1994) classifies as free: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia. The countries classified as partly free are: Slovakia, Croatia, Romania, Belarus and Ukraine.

⁶ See Richard Rose, "Escaping from Absolute Dissatisfaction: a Trial-and-Error Model of Change in Eastern Europe," *Journal of Theoretical Politics* (Vol. 4, No.4 1992), 371-93.

⁷ For further development of this passage, see Richard Rose and William T.E. Mishler, "Mass Reaction to Regime Change in Eastern Europe: Polarization or Leaders and Laggards?" *British Journal of Political Science* (Vol. 24, No. 2 1994), 159-82.

Richard Rose is director, the Centre for the Study of Public Policy, University of Strathclyde, Scotland and international scientific advisor, the Paul Lazarsfeld Society, Vienna; Christian Haerpfer is scientific director, the Lazarsfeld Society

Motivans—concluded

success in the Czech Republic and Estonia can also be attributed to high levels of foreign investment, active western trading partners, and an early start to economic reform.

In light of the positive economic achievements in Poland and Hungary, the recent election results represent an interesting development. Although satisfaction with living standards has been growing, and the new private sectors in each country are the largest in Central and Eastern Europe, voters still felt compelled to elect figures associated with the previous system. While the overall economic situation was important, other factors undoubtedly contributed to these election results.

The outlook for other former Communist countries is less optimistic, simply because there is a much longer way to go in terms of economic reform. Public support for market reforms has been considerably lower and there is evidence of sizable support for a return to a planned economy. The leaders in these countries (European Russia, Belarus and Ukraine) will be under pressure to identify and remove obstacles to economic reform, particularly in terms of widening the scope of the private sector, before any improvement in living standards or greater public support for market reform is possible. While increased social spending may act as a stopgap measure in terms of placating public dissatisfaction, the long-term political and economic stability of these countries is likely to be bound to needed economic reforms.

*Albert Motivans is
research analyst, Radio Free Europe/Radio
Liberty Research Institute*

Endnote:

¹ This cross-national study was fielded each spring from 1992-94 across ten countries using a survey instrument standardized in local languages. In each country, the sample sizes ranged from 2,000 to 2,500 completed interviews.