



THE RETURN OF THE COMMUNISTS IN EASTERN EUROPE:

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I have a terrible confession to make. I have never belonged to a Communist Party. Many of the best anti-Communists were members in their idealistic and misguided youth. These include the Americans Claire Sterling (recently deceased) and Herbert Romerstein, Robert Conquest, the late Ken Watkins of Sheffield and the Frenchman Alain Besançon. Although I have spent a good deal of my life studying and fighting communism I have to say that I lack the inside knowledge some others have.

Nor can I claim to be an expert on Eastern Europe, although I was in Romania the other day and have also been to Czechoslovakia and what used to be East Germany.

ROMANIA

Let me start with Romania. I went to Bucharest to attend a small international conference, and I made it clear that I would attend only on condition that an old friend of mine, a long-time dissident in exile named Ion Ratiu, would be there as well.

A self-made millionaire, Ion founded and led the World Union of Free Romanians. He returned to his native country, from London, after the removal of the dictator Ceausescu, and imported a printing press with a view to launching an opposition newspaper before the country's first "free" elections in 1990. The word "free" should be seen in quotation marks.

In power after Ceausescu, then and now, was one of the late dictator's former henchmen, Ion Iliescu. What happened next was that Ratiu's electricity supply was cut off, so that his printing press could not be used. In his view there was massive fraud in those first "free" elections.

Since then, Ratiu has been harassed in various other ways. On one occasion, the contents of his flat were messed up or destroyed. There have been two thefts, of 160,000 and 100,000 US dollars, and early last year, the flat was burned to ashes. Ratiu's daily, aptly named *Cotidianul*, appears without prior censorship, although television is tightly controlled by the government. Despite his problems, Ratiu is deputy President of the Romanian Parliament. Incidentally, he recognises that further elections in 1992 were relatively fair.

In terms of natural resources, such as oil, coal and minerals, Romania should be the richest country in Eastern Europe. Instead, it is the poorest, except for Albania.

In fact, it is fair to say that a communist dictatorship has continued in Romania without a break, although it does not compete with Ceausescu's in sheer malevolence.

THE CHANGING OF THE LABEL

Looking around elsewhere in the former satellite empire, and in some of the republics of the former USSR, one finds a pattern on the following lines:

Phase 1: The ruling party changes its name, dropping the "communist" label. Instead, there are relatively reassuring terms, such as Alliance, Front, Socialist, Democratic, and so forth.

Phase 2: The ex-Communists allow free elections, without interfering, and anti-Communists win.

Phase 3: Having had no experience of government for nearly 50 years (or more than 70 in the former Soviet Union — now the Commonwealth of Independent

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY



States or CIS), the new governing parties make a mess of things.

Phase 4: The renamed Communists are back in power after further elections.

Allowing for local variations, this is what has happened in nearly all the ex-satellites. Let us take a quick look at the situation.

EASTERN EUROPE

In **Poland**, President Lech Walesa succeeded in his recent battle to oust the Peasant Party leader Waldemar Pawlak as Prime Minister. However, his successor, elected by the Lower House on 1 March, is the ex-Communist Josef Oleksy. Thus the same coalition of the Peasant Party and the ex-Communist Democratic Left Alliance is still in power.

Communists are also in power in **Hungary, Bulgaria, and Slovakia** (which broke away from Czechoslovakia two years ago).

In Hungary, the Communists now called themselves the Hungarian Socialist Party, under Gyula Horn. The governing coalition also includes the Alliance of Free Democrats, who are liberals.

In Bulgaria, the ex-Communists, now calling themselves the Bulgarian Socialist Party, led by Jean Videnov, were defeated at the 1991 elections, but won an absolute majority last December.

In Slovakia, a populist ex-Communist, Vladimir Meciar, leads the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia in a ruling coalition, having won 35 per cent of the vote in 1994.

The Czech Republic, with Albania, is the only exception to the rule in the former East European satellites. The Czechs, in particular, with Vaclav Havel as President and Vaclav Klaus as Premier, seem solidly on the capitalist and democratic road.

THE FORMER USSR

The former **USSR** is of considerable interest. Starting at the Western end with the three Baltic republics (**Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia**), all three opted not to join the CIS when the USSR collapsed. The elections of October 1992 brought the ex-Communists back to power. Now styled the Lithuanian Democratic Labour Party, their leader is Algirdas Brzauskas, who has ousted the anti-Communist Vytautas Landsbergis. In Latvia and Lithuania, however, right-wing groups are in power.

Turning now to the original home of communism, *Russia* now has more than a dozen Communist parties, which actually use the unpopular word. The most important one is the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, run by Gennadi Zuganov, a former deputy head of the ideological department of the old Soviet Central Committee. But please note that the Communists are not actually in power in Russia.

They are, however, in a number of the former Soviet Republics, notably in **Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan** and of course **Georgia**, where one of the West's old favourites and a former KGB chief, Eduard Shevardnadze, now rules after a devastating civil war. Although ex-Communists are in office in **Ukraine and Kirghistark**, current policies indicate a break with the past. The same is true of **Byelarus and Armenia**.

RESTORED COMMUNISM OR RUSSIAN EMPIRE

Before leaving this rather dismal subject, I should like to list the criteria that would indicate a genuine change of heart, or at any rate of policy. By far the most important point is whether the ex-Communists back in power really are "ex". In other words, have they really shed the Maoist-Leninist ideology which has been their *only* claim to legitimacy, in the name of History? Or are they just biding their time, and planning to restore the one-party totalist State that collapsed?

There are real difficulties in moving away from the ruling ideology, even when the party no longer believes in it. Does a change of name mean what it says, or is it a typical, old-time deception ploy?

In China, the economic reforms launched by the aged Deng Xiaoping are totally incompatible with the professed ideology. I call it "squaring the ideological circle". The absolute rule of a party dedicated to the Maoist version of Marxism-Leninism cannot last; just as in Spain and Chile, the authoritarian (not totalitarian) regimes of Generals Franco and Pinochet did not survive the liberalising of the economy. But for the time being, the ruling party is still in Beijing, as the unfortunate inhabitants of Hong Kong will soon discover.

In the CIS, not surprisingly, the dominant entity, Russia, is busy reasserting its predominance, not only in Chechnya, but elsewhere. In recent weeks President Yeltsin has concluded military pacts with Georgia and Armenia and a naval pact with Ukraine. Is this an attempt to restore a unified Communist system? Or just a resurgence of Russian imperialism. Probably the latter, I think.

We also need to know whether the old instrument of coercion, the KGB (now split into various pieces) is going to take over again, not only in Russia but elsewhere in the surrounding "near abroad", as they call it.

Since the West did not *win* the Cold War, we have not been able to bring the criminals of the system to justice. Those dedicated fellow-travellers of the 1930s, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, in their monumental work, *Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation*, had a chapter entitled "The vocation of leadership". Is this the revived "justification" for the second coming of ruling Communist Parties?

We cannot be sure, yet.