EAST EUROPEAN REACTIONS TO HUNGARY'S DECISION ON EAST GERMAN REFUGEES

by Jan Obrman*

Summary: The first reactions to Hungary's decision to allow East German refugees to leave for the West illustrate the widening ideological gap between the Warsaw Pact's allies. The Soviet Union's reaction was cautious; Czechoslovakia and Romania clearly supported the GDR on the issue; Polish reactions indicated understanding for the Hungarian decision; and Bulgaria ignored the matter altogether.

The reactions from Eastern Europe to Hungary's decision, announced on September 10, to allow East German refugees to leave for the West illustrate the widening ideological gap between the Warsaw Pact's allies.

The Soviet Union. The Soviet Union sent mixed signals to both Hungary and the GDR. Although the Soviet authorities clearly indicated their support for the GDR, they did not criticize Hungary directly but resorted to the less politically sensitive criticism of West Germany. The first radio reports, on September 11, reported without comment that the Hungarian government had decided to allow East German refugees to leave for the West and quoted the GDR's news agency ADN on East Berlin's reaction to the decision.1 The official news agency TASS, however, accused "certain political circles and some media" in West Germany of launching a "tendentious campaign" against the GDR. It also said that

the GDR is an inalienable part of the Warsaw Treaty [Organization] and is a true friend and ally. This should be clear to anyone who might try to encroach on its sovereignty and independence.2

The Soviet Television newscast Novosti3 on the same day carried a report that indicated a certain degree of understanding for Hungary's decision:

This material was prepared for the use of the staff of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.
In recent weeks the Hungarian government has been constantly occupying itself with issues connected with the situation of East German citizens in Hungary who wish to go to the FRG. Consultations were held with the appropriate agencies in the FRG. Talks were also held between the GDR and the FRG on this question, but they produced no results. . . . The situation on the Austro-Hungarian border became tense, and there were a growing number of illegal border crossings and various crimes. It was in this situation that the Hungarian government was forced to take the decision.

Although the report also quoted from the ADN statement, it did not support either side and concluded only that "one more difficult knot has been tied in the socialist community, which is already sufficiently burdened with problems."

A commentary by Soviet Television's Bonn correspondent, Vladimir Kondratev, 4 accused the FRG of attempting to "undermine the East German state and seeking a split in the socialist community to achieve German reunification." As to Hungary's decision to open its borders, Kondratev said only that "the FRG is putting pressure on Hungary on the pretext of the observance of human rights" and that Hungary eventually "unilaterally declined to observe the 1969 agreement with the GDR" forbidding citizens to cross borders with the West without a permit from their own country. Kondratev conceded, however, that the matter was not "unambiguously simple" and that what he called the "forbidden fruit effect" and material considerations played a role for refugees. On the same day Foreign Ministry Spokesman Gennadii Gerasimov said at a press conference that "Hungary has taken a very unexpected and unusual step." He added that the situation was "of some concern to us" but that it did not directly affect the Soviet Union. 5

CPSU Politburo member Egor Ligachev, who is believed to be the main advocate of conservatism in the USSR, reportedly criticized West Germany for its "slander, enticement, and recruitment of East Germans." 6 Ligachev was on an official visit to East Berlin, but Soviet sources rejected speculation that his visit had any connection with the refugee crisis. Supreme Soviet Deputy Boris El'tsin, the outspoken former Moscow party leader, on the other hand, said at a news conference in Baltimore that an international agreement should state that "people have the right to live where they want. Therefore, that sort of mass emigration, however difficult it is for the country itself, should be insured." 7

Czechoslovakia. The Czechoslovak media's first announcement about the the exodus was on September 11, when Radio Prague's correspondent in Budapest reported Hungary's decision, quoted ADN's sharp criticism of it, and warned of the possible consequences of the Hungarian decision:
The suspension of the construction of the hydroelectric project at Nagymaros: a violation of an international agreement with the CSSR; the suspension of the validity of the paragraphs concerning the exit of GDR citizens from Hungary to a third country: a violation of an international agreement with the GDR. If we get accustomed to violations of international agreements, if we see them merely as a cavalier offense, will we not have to worry one day about the fate of such important international agreements as the Warsaw Pact or the CMEA? For, after all, the popular wisdom that has endured for centuries warns that a small trickle can turn into a flood.8

Other media reports quoted ADN or East German newspapers on the issue, and a spokesman for the Foreign Ministry said that the government had no immediate comment. The official news agency CTK issued a statement on 12 September in which it claimed that "certain political circles and mass media in West Germany" are waging a "campaign against the GDR." The statement said that "the illegal departure of East German citizens" was at variance with the spirit of the all-European process, the results of the Vienna Follow-up Conference, and the fundamental norms of international law." Without naming Hungary, CTK said that it was regrettable that the exodus had been made possible through the "violation of agreements" that the GDR had concluded with other states.

More than 100 East Germans are reported to have crossed the Czechoslovak-Hungarian border illegally (presumably in order to go to the West),9 but an estimated 400 to 450 East Germans were said to be encamped in the grounds of the West German Embassy in Prague until recently. A number have now left, but others remain. The Czechoslovak media reported that there were at least 150 East German citizens still in the compound of the embassy.10 The GDR has repeatedly praised Prague for its refusal to allow a solution of the situation that would run counter to the GDR's interests.

Poland. Polish Television reported the possibility of an exodus as soon as indications seemed to confirm that this was likely,11 and most newspapers on September 11 carried a statement by the official news agency PAP about the Hungarian decision or quoted from Hungarian sources, although they failed to mention the GDR's strong criticism of the move. Polish coverage was factual, mostly without comment. On September 12 the Solidarity daily Gazeta Wyborcza carried a long report on the departure of the refugees from Budapest under the title "Thank you Hungary."

A spokesman for the Polish President was quoted as having said on 11 September that the decision to open the borders was purely a Hungarian concern. He refused to comment on "an issue that is only a matter for the three countries involved."12 When asked how Poland would behave under similar circumstances, he
refused to speculate and reportedly added that Poland "regards its bilateral agreements with the GDR as binding" and that there was no intention of acting against the interests of the GDR.

Solidarity spokesman Janusz Onyszkiewicz, however, said that Solidarity was "in favor of the opening of all doors in our common European house. We think [Hungary's] decision was good, because it enhances this process." He added that in this way the division of Europe could be overcome and that it was "up to the East Germans now to think about reform." 13

Romania. The Romanian media's first reaction did not come until September 12, when the Romanian news agency Agerpres released a statement clearly supporting the GDR. 14 The statement pointed out that the Romanian public had noted with concern the "illegal action of the FRG in luring a great number of East German citizens" and bringing them to West Germany via Hungary. It criticized Hungary for "grossly violating international conventions" and damaging "relations between independent and sovereign states." It went on to say:

The unconcealed interference in the GDR's internal affairs organized by revanchist, revisionist, and chauvinistic circles against socialist countries and socialism in general constitutes a grave infringement of human rights and of national and international law. The attitude of the Hungarian authorities . . . is incomprehensible.

Agerpres urged West Germany to stop those actions "that contravene the provisions of the Helsinki Final Act and affect the general climate in Europe." Romania's support for the East German position is hardly surprising, since Hungary recognizes as refugees Romanian citizens who refuse to return to Romania from Hungary.

Bulgaria. The Bulgarian authorities and the media seem to have ignored the East German refugee question completely. There have, however, been signs of an attempt to increase cooperation with the GDR; and praise for conservative regimes in general prevails. At the same time, there is a tendency to avoid comment on any sensitive issue, which suggests a general loss of direction in Bulgaria. The refugee issue is particularly delicate at the moment, as Bulgaria is facing an unprecedented exodus itself. An estimated 310,000 ethnic Turks have already left Bulgaria to escape Sofia's policy of forced national assimilation.

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1 AFP, 11 September 1989.
3 Soviet Television, 11 September 1989, 1:00 P.M.
4 Ibid., 12 September 1989, 2:30 P.M.
5 Reuter, 12 September 1989.
6 Neues Deutschland, 13 September 1989.
8 Radio Prague, 11 September 1989, 4:30 P.M.
9 AP, 12 September 1989.
10 Radio Hvezda, 14 September 1989, 6:30 A.M.
14 Radio Bucharest, 12 September 1989, 9:00 P.M.

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