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PHASE-OUT OF THE MTS, ONCE THE POWER CENTERS IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

An appeal by a Rumanian agricultural official to perfect the operations of the Machine Tractor Stations is a reminder that this Stalinist relic of collectivization is still a part of the socialist organization of agriculture in some of the East European countries.¹ A first deputy chairman of the higher council of agriculture cited the goals set by the national conference of the RCP which called for an acceleration in the work of the MTSs by improving their overall performances and capabilities to operate at profitable levels.

Seen in the light of the current economic reforms in the Comecon countries the adherence to an outmoded, authoritarian agency of control in the countryside seems a contradictory and regressive development in the process of decompression of a command-type economy. The purpose of this paper is to bring up to date the role of the power/machinery complex in Communist agriculture as well as project the general policy the regimes are now using in supplying power to agriculture.

The MTS was a Soviet innovation and later adopted in toto by the East European regimes when they collectivized their own agriculture. The stations became the nuclei of party control in the countryside with a monopoly on the power and machinery resources available to the collective farms. They supplied technical assistance with their specialists who were almost all party members. They also dominated farm planning. In some countries the stations were effectively used as agencies for the procurement of farm products by the state. While the system was an

1) Agricultura Socialista, No. 4, Bucharest, 25 January 1968.

efficient organ for control of the farms and the collection of farm produce, they were wasteful of resources and expensive to operate. The network was supported by the state budget and accountable to the Ministry of Agriculture.

While proposals to liquidate the MTSs and sell their machinery to the farms were made in the postwar period, and promptly vetoed by Stalin, it was not until 1958, almost thirty years after the introduction of collectivization in the Soviet Union, that Khrushchev gradually sold the machinery to the collective farms in the interests of operating efficiency, encouraging kolkhoz democracy, and abolishing the managerial anomaly of having "two bosses on the land." Most of the Comecon countries followed the Soviet example to some degree or another in reorganizing their tractor stations.

By and large, the abolition of the MTS and the sale of their machinery to collective farms made a decided improvement in rationalizing the farming operations and giving some degree of independence of action to collective farming. Centralized party control was to an extent relaxed. The quality of specialists and the number of mechanizers were noticeably strengthened on the farms. As a result of the changes a feeling of local initiative permeated the farm staffs, particularly among the young men who had charge of the tractors and farm machinery. The Soviet press spoke of the improvement of the cultural level in the countryside with the infusion of the skilled workers who accompanied the transfer of the machinery from the stations to the farms.

While the advantages of the abolition of the MTS were considerable, there were also a number of negative aspects. Apart from the ideological critics who argued that the sale of state property to the farms -- which reduced it to the level of cooperative property --- was a dangerous step backward, the kolkhozniki themselves felt the financial burden of the takeover. For several years all but the richest farms were forced to cut investments and reduce wage payments to members in order to pay for the machinery out of current income. Here lies the main reason for the shortfall of investment in agriculture that occurred after 1959 in the later Khrushchev period. Another negative aspect of a social nature, however, was caused by the influx of the skilled mechanizers into the villages in that it heightened the unfavorable contrast between the living levels of rural officials, elite workers, and the rank-and-file collective farmers. The pay differentials and prerequisites gave the newcomers

status and privilege in the kolkhozy structure.² This acted to undermine the work incentive of the average collective farm worker.

Most of the Comecon countries, with some exceptions, went through similar ideological and logistic pains to those the USSR had experienced following the transformation of state property into cooperative property in the process of liquidating their tractor stations.

Survey of the MTS Decentralization in East European Agriculture

1968

	<u>Present Status</u>	<u>Indicated Future Trend</u>
<u>Rumania</u>	MTS supreme: no sale of machinery to farms.	MTS to expand operations to 320 stations by 1970 (1966: 273 stations). No change in policy indicated.
<u>Czecho-slovakia</u>	Mixed system; coop farms bought most of the MTS machinery, but MTSS were not abolished and still operate.	Dual system to remain, but MTS will concentrate to help the weak farms with power work.
<u>Bulgaria</u>	About 3/4 of MTS machinery sold to coop farms; MTS turned into repair stations.	A phase out of the MTS, except in the hilly regions.
<u>Hungary</u>	MTS converted into repair stations and machinery sold to farms, except heavy tractors and special combines.	Repair tractor stations the only active units.
<u>Poland</u>	MTS long abolished, turned into repair stations (POM) which service both farms and agricultural circles.	POM work with circles in process of expansion.

2) For the differentiation in kolkhoz income by types of workers on the farms, see RFE Research report "Model for Farm Migration," 18 January 1968, by cz.

USSR

MTS fully liquidated and partly turned into RTS. Farms own their power machinery.

No change indicated. RTS charged with land amelioration work at state expense.

It will be seen that through the entire Comecon belt Rumania is the only country that still retains the MTS system in its entirety. Why Rumania should adhere so rigidly to the Stalinist order of socialized farming is not readily apparent. It was, however, the last regime to carry out collectivization so perhaps the concept of having "two masters of the land" is not fully understood. Another reason is likely to be far more decisive: next to Poland, Rumania has the least tractor power resources in relation to cropland. It is one of the most under-mechanized countries in Europe. To correct this disparity to a degree the 9th Congress of the Rumanian CP decided to expand the MTSS to 320 by 1970 from the present 273. It remains rather certain that until tractors and machinery become more abundant, the regime will consider the MTS meet current needs and the primacy of the MTS as an institution will remain fixed in Rumania.

Of the remaining two countries where the MTS still has a footing, CSSR and Bulgaria, the phase-out seems only a matter of time. Czechoslovakia has the highest index of tractor power to cropland among all Communist countries. On January 1, 1967, of a total of 185,900 tractors in 15 HP terms, the collectives operated 119,200, the state farms 40,700, while only 8,500 were attached to the MTS. These latter are designed mainly to work with the weaker collective farms which lack the means to operate modern machinery efficiently. A total of 97 stations are still functioning in the country, or one per district. Of all countries the CSSR will bear the closest watching to determine the general fate of the East European MTS despite the obstacles of a skilled labor shortages, high cost of machines, and scarcity of spare parts. The projected reorganization of the agricultural system envisages that the stations will become an integral part of the District Agricultural association, a vertical-horizontal supra-enterprise organ of the knozraschet variety. The tractor park has remained markedly static, however, reflecting the general economic stagnation: whereas during 1966 new tractors to the number of 14,474 were delivered to agriculture, in 1967 the number fell to 7,397.

Bulgaria, the third country where the MTSS still exist, has transferred fully three fourths of the machinery

to the collective and state farms. The remnants of the MTS operate exclusively in the hilly region of the country. Compared to 218 MTS in 1961 there were 89 stations in operation in 1966. The network is now under control of the Central Cooperative Union rather than the Ministry of Agriculture and not dependent on the state budget. There is no indication that a dual system of machinery ownership is under consideration as in the CSSR, and it is more likely the MTS will be phased out in time.

Hungary, Poland, and the USSR, all with a low power index in relation to national cropland, have liquidated the MTS and in varying degrees turned them into repair stations. There is no indication whatever that a revival of the Stalin-inspired power centers of agricultural control is under consideration. On the contrary, there is every evidence that the MTS is a dead issue in these countries.

On balance, the sale of the MTS tractors and machinery to the collective farms was a positive, rational, and democratically oriented measure for improving collective farming in Eastern Europe. In the measure that local incentive and initiative were stimulated at the expense of centralized decision-making, to that extent can the change in machine-power policy be termed successful. In the production field, however, the results have not been so positive. The change has not yielded the great increase in output that was promised. This may be the result of an inadequate supply of skilled workers who could maximize the returns for machine inputs. Agriculture today has greater need of skilled manpower than ever before. While the rural population exodus will continue it is essential to prevent the sudden and sustained departure of the most active elements in the villages, as happened in the post-war years. In a Soviet study, which is applicable to the neighboring East European countries, it is projected that by 1970 fifty percent of the farm workers will need a knowledge of machine operation compared to eleven percent in 1967. To provide such a significant expansion of skilled workers is a sizeable task and requires a far-reaching improvement in the working conditions and the organization of labor in the countryside. Full farm mechanization without a large and stable pool of skilled workers is in the realm of fantasy.

The phase-out of the MTS as a Communist control institution has been a gradual phenomenon in the last decade. It is by no means final. In Rumania it is still expanding while Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia have retained

a mixed system. If, in the future, machinery becomes more abundant and of better quality the need for central machine stations will become redundant. However, given the low level of mechanization in Communist agriculture, and the continued lag in machinery output, the complete liquidation of the MTS is still a problem for the future to resolve. Repair service agencies will continue to grow in every socialist order in agriculture. They should be strengthened in each country against the day when the regimes face up to the hard decision to provide a variety of garden-type tractors and machines for enlarged private plots of farm workers and employees. Such a policy would ensure once and for all an abundance of farm products in the Comecon lands. A hard look in this direction of liberalization seems in order.

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