

# USING SURVEYS TO MONITOR CHANGE IN EASTERN EUROPE

*By Richard Rose*

Everyone is watching Eastern Europe. But what are we looking for? And how will we know what is happening when it happens?<sup>1</sup>

Communist regimes had no need for information: They could dictate their version of reality to their subjects. As Karl Deutsch has written, one of the hallmarks of power is the capacity to ignore feedback.<sup>2</sup> But open, democratic societies cannot function effectively without a continuing feedback of information about what's happening within society. If the government doesn't know where things are at when it takes a decision, then after the event it cannot make a before-and-after evaluation of the effectiveness of its policies.

Every profession—history, journalism, the law, accountancy, and economics—has distinctive methods for seeking information. Public opinion experts have experience in going directly to the people to find out what they are thinking and doing. Whereas under Communist authority the regime could proclaim, as Bertolt Brecht remarked, that “the people must be dissolved,” in a democratic market society the people are the ultimate arbiters of what happens.

The fall of totalitarian regimes, with networks of informers who penetrated the workplace, friendships and family relationships, has made it possible for people to speak freely. Public opinion surveys no longer need to be conducted by interviewing refugees, or be subject to controls by a party elite.<sup>3</sup>

## What To Ask?

Every good survey should have a questionnaire that is both theoretically relevant and meaningful to respondents. Two complementary yet different strategies can be followed. Western social

scientists are inclined to view Eastern Europe as an opportunity to test theories derived from previous research in western societies. There is a prima facie case for doing so in such projects as the World Values Survey, which is designed to inventory values in the family of mankind.

But asking standard western questions in an East European context has self-imposed limitations. It may make Poland appear like Pennsylvania simply because the same question is asked in both places. East Europeans do want to know how they compare on democratic values and economic outlooks with people in open societies—but they also need to know about the impact of forty years of repression.

The other extreme is to concentrate upon events specific to a single country, an approach natural to area specialists with intimate knowledge of a country's language and past. But social scientists are skeptical about any one individual being able to represent the ‘mind’ or ‘soul’ of a nation. Furthermore, a claim that the political culture of Hungary or Czechoslovakia is unique implies that the common experience of forty years of Communist domination has had no homogenizing effect upon East European societies.

Asking East Europeans what they think gives westerners lots to think about too. Survey work in Eastern Europe today requires the use of normal methods in abnormal circumstances. Normality is easiest to achieve in sampling; the principles of a stratified sample are the same, whatever the language used. But differences in context require imaginative adaptations of theories and concepts appropriate to western nations. A questionnaire should thus combine familiar and unfamiliar questions. For example, in addition to asking “What party would you vote for?”, it is also meaningful to ask:

“What party would you never vote for.” The answer to the latter question—the Communists come first in being rejected—is based on far more knowledge than answers to questions about parties and personalities, many of which are ephemeral.

The starting point in my research was the observation that while democracy allows voters and politicians to debate freely what they would like to have, the pathological inheritance of a planned economy makes it impossible for people to have what they would like—a free society and western standards of living—immediately after an election. As Norwegian sociologist and political scientist Stein Rokkan said, “Votes count; resources decide.”<sup>4</sup> There are many liberal western social scientists who adhere to a non-Marxist form of economic determinism that predicts that unfavorable or deteriorating economic conditions will lead to political instability. In Eastern Europe this implies threats to democracy and the embryonic market system.

Research on the impact of economic recession upon political behavior in western societies in the 1970s made me skeptical about claims of total collapse. In particular, I had developed ideas about how people get by in times of fiscal stress. Just before the Berlin Wall came down, I had completed a book about the ways in which people cope with their everyday concerns, *Ordinary People in Public Policy*.<sup>5</sup> It had a conceptual framework about coping strategies that appeared particularly suitable to the upheavals in the political and economic systems of Eastern Europe.

Through contacts developed as a guest professor at the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin, I began piloting a questionnaire with group discussions in Bulgaria in January, 1991, working with Andrei Raichev

and Kancho Stoychev at NAPOC. My own systematizing and conceptualizing inclinations were complemented by the readiness of Bulgarians, both academic and non-academic, to provide anecdotes that could test the robustness of a questionnaire that took five months to evolve. By April, I was fortunate in starting work in a second country, Czechoslovakia, where Marek Boguszak and Vladimir Rak of AISA, Prague, provided additional insights.

There is now a major program of research underway on "Post-Communist Societies between State and Market" based at the Centre for the Study of Public Policy of the University of Strathclyde.<sup>6</sup> The program is based on a questionnaire about economic and political behavior and attitudes, reflecting existential problems facing the mass of people in Eastern Europe today, and is also relevant to major social science theories. The starting point is the impact upon present behavior and thinking of life in a non-democratic non-market economy. Thus, much of the survey focuses upon topics rarely considered in modern or post-modern societies.

In the uncharted world of Eastern Europe, comparative research is particularly desirable, in order to identify which phenomena are generic to post-Communist societies, or specific to a single country. It also makes it possible to test the extent to which age, gender, and education create divisions within a society, and thus identify cross-national similarities among similar social groups.

### Getting By In Six Economies

If you wonder how people in Eastern Europe get by on a salary of \$50 or \$100 a month, the answer is simple: They don't. The money that people earn in their official employment is usually only a part of their cash income. Moreover, the food, housing and clothing that they consume is often produced without money in do-it-

yourself economies. As the Bulgarian proverb puts it: "If you have to live from only one job, you will die."

In every country from Prague to the Urals, there are six economies operating simultaneously. The art of getting by in Eastern Europe today is to assemble a portfolio of economies rather than rely solely on a job with a state enterprise or in the precarious second (that is, private and not yet legal) economy. Nationwide surveys in Czechoslovakia, Poland and Bulgaria show that two-thirds of families have at least three different economies in their portfolio, some using money and others operating without cash, some legal and others alegal or illegal.

**Table 1**  
**Participation in Six Forms of Economic Activity**

|   | Bulgaria | Czechoslovakia | Poland |
|---|----------|----------------|--------|
| OFFICIAL economy: legal, monetized                          |          |                |        |
| One or more in household in Official Economy                | 79%      | 89%            | 81%    |
| SOCIAL economies: non-monetized, alegal                     |          |                |        |
| Household production <sup>1</sup>                           | 79       | 69             | 81     |
| Help friends and relatives <sup>2</sup>                     | 48       | 47             | 31     |
| UNCIVIL economies: illegal, monetized                       |          |                |        |
| One or more in household in Second Economy                  | 14       | 34             | 33     |
| Paying or receiving bribes <sup>3</sup>                     | 40       | 57             | 35     |
| Using foreign currency to purchase goods inside own country | 18       | 9              | 17     |

<sup>1</sup>One or more of the following: Spends time weekly growing food; more than an hour a day standing in line; built a house; lot of time repairing house.

<sup>2</sup>Mentions 3 or more of 7 ways of helping friends, relatives: growing food; helping build or repair house; looking after children; making clothes; standing in line; using car to take people places; other.

<sup>3</sup>Doing things through connections: either pays to get things done or is paid to do things, or both.

Four-fifths of households have at least one member working for a state enterprise in the official economy (Table 1). But when people are asked whether or not they can get enough from their work to buy the things they really need, at least three-fifths say they cannot.

To augment consumption, people need not earn more money. More than two-thirds of families grow a significant amount of food or build or repair their houses. Help from friends and relatives is another way to get by; a majority are involved in informal exchanges. One family may have a car and another a plot of land outside town; together, they can

work a vegetable plot more efficiently. A Russian maxim is "Without friends you cannot survive."

The other major alternative is to deal in "cash only" economies. Perversely, Socialist societies made these economies more important by creating shortages and paying low wages. Whereas in western societies people usually work in the shadow economy to earn money for extras, in Eastern Europe up to a third of families work in the second economy to earn money for necessities. Up to half of households are caught up in a system of paying bribes or "tips" to get access to nominally free welfare state services such as medical treatment, or to obtain scarce consumer goods. The use of foreign currency in the domestic market place is the ultimate repudiation of a country's claim to be a solvent economy. It is largely a capital city phenomenon; less than a fifth of households are actually able to get their hands on foreign currencies.

As Charles Dickens' Mr. Micawber pointed out, the critical question is not how much you consume but whether you can balance what you consume against what you can produce. Thanks to having six economies

to choose from, 76% in Czechoslovakia, 59% in Poland, and 54% in Bulgaria can pass the Micawber test. They can get by on what they earn or even save a little money without having to spend savings or borrow money.

The proportion of people who can get by in Eastern Europe today is different in degree, not kind, from Western Europe. The percentage of Britons who can live without borrowing money or drawing on their savings is only six points higher than in Czechoslovakia. The standard of living is much different, but people have no choice but to live within the limits of what they earn. Thus, the median family in Eastern Europe today is both dissatisfied

with their economic situation *and* coping with what they have.

### Rejecting the Past

The transformation of government and economy in Eastern Europe is intended to be a complete rejection of the past. Even though many political leaders are engaged in a trial-and-error journey toward an unknown destination, they are very clear about what they are escaping from, a system creating absolute dissatisfaction.<sup>7</sup> But to what extent do ordinary people share the desire for discontinuity held by democratic political leaders and market-oriented economists?

The appropriate measure for post-Communist societies is a "heaven/hell" scale, asking people to rate the old system, the present system, and the system in five years' time on a scale that runs from -100 to +100. This avoids assuming that just because people are dissatisfied with the present situation, they are no better off than yesterday.

When people are asked to evaluate the old centrally planned economic system, opinions are divided. The median respondent in all three countries places the centrally planned economy at 0, neither good nor bad (Table 2). When people are asked to evaluate the present economic system, the median person in Bulgaria or Czechoslovakia again rates it neither good nor bad. In Poland, where fieldwork was conducted some months after an IMF policy of stabilizing the economy had been carried out, the median respondent had a modestly positive view of the economy.

East Europeans dissatisfied with the present see themselves as waiting for a better day ahead. The great majority in all three societies expect their economy to be working well in five years' time. The median rating in each society is more than half way to heaven, that is, above +50, a

big rise in a relatively short period of time. Thus, while the present economic situation has the same numerical rating as the

to democracy, namely, a one-party Communist regime. In Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia the median person rates the old system as more than halfway to hell, and in Poland the median respondent is also negative (Table 3). The intensity with which the old regime is rejected is shown by 33% of Bulgarians, 26% in Czechoslovakia and 25% in Poland rating it as absolute hell, that is, -100.

Notwithstanding the teething troubles of fledgling democracies, the present system is seen as an enormous advance over the old regime. In Bulgaria the change from past to present is more than 100 points

on the heaven/hell scale. In Czechoslovakia it is 90 points, and in Poland a substantial 47 points. In each society citizens see the regime in even more positive terms in five years' time.

Popular endorsement of a pluralist political system runs ahead of popular evaluation of a market economy in all three societies. The old political system was disliked much more than the nonmarket economy; hence, political change is even more welcome than economic changes. Satisfaction with the present political system runs 51% ahead of economic satisfaction in Bulgaria, 32% ahead in Czechoslovakia, and 5% ahead in Poland. In five years' time the great majority expect the gap to be closed, with the economy becoming as satisfactory as the political system (Tables 2, 3).

Approval for fledgling democratic systems is striking because each regime has demonstrated major faults. Bulgaria was governed by a coalition of anti-Communists and ex-Communists when the survey was taken, and only a few months ago did an unstable anti-Communist Union of Democratic Forces finally win control of Parliament. In Czechoslovakia there is an ethnic dispute about relations between Slovaks and people in Czech lands. In Poland the

**Table 2**  
**Evaluation of Economic System**  
**Past, Present, Future**

**Question :** Here is a scale ranking how well an economy works. The top, plus 100, is the best and the bottom, minus 100, is the worst. Where on this scale would you put: The Socialist economy before the Revolution; our present economic system; our economic system in five years' time?

|         | Bulgaria            | Czechoslovakia | Poland |
|---------|---------------------|----------------|--------|
|         | (median respondent) |                |        |
| Future  | 54                  | 51             | 54     |
| Present | 0                   | 0              | 14     |
| Past    | 0                   | 0              | 0      |

past, the meaning is different: The present is seen as having the difficulties of transition to a buoyant economy, rather than stagnating like the old system.

The political system can be transformed more rapidly than the economic system; in East European countries Communist dictatorships fell in a matter of weeks, and censorship could be lifted overnight. The great political issue now is

**Table 3**  
**Evaluation of Political System**  
**Past, Present, Future**

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

|         | Bulgaria            | Czechoslovakia | Poland |
|---------|---------------------|----------------|--------|
|         | (median respondent) |                |        |
| Future  | 66                  | 59             | 55     |
| Present | 51                  | 32             | 19     |
| Past    | -52                 | -58            | -28    |

not which personality becomes Prime Minister or which party wins an election. Anyone who watches politics knows that democracy involves conflict, and incumbent politicians become unpopular when things go wrong, as they will from time to time in a free society. The big question is whether democracy survives.

Every adult in Eastern Europe has had firsthand experience of an alternative

autumn parliamentary election produced a turnout far below an American election, party fragmentation far beyond any other proportional representation system, and President Lech Walesa from time to time shows impatience with the constraints of democracy.

Democratic regimes in Eastern Europe are not evaluated for what they do but for what they don't do; they do not repress individual freedoms like the Communist regime. This emerges clearly when people are asked to evaluate the performance of government in a number of different domains (Table 4). A substantial majority rates the democratic regime highly on only one count, "Everybody is free to say what he or she thinks." On pocketbook matters, less than a third think the government is good for the country's economy. On every issue except free speech, the performance of government is rated positively by an average of only one-quarter of its citizens.

Ineffectiveness does not produce rejection of the system of government. A striking feature of public opinion in Eastern Europe today is that the median respondent believes that the government is not doing a good job in particular policy areas, such as the economy, but it is a good system (Tables 3, 4).

If Eastern European polities are judged by the standards of civics textbooks in America or Britain, they are bound to appear full of imperfections. Come to think of it, the same is true if the practice of democracy in Washington or Westminster is evaluated by unattainable ideals.

The evidence at hand shows that East Europeans are realists, not idealists. They judge their fledgling systems in comparison with what they know best—four decades of Communist domination. This judgment is consistent with Winston

Churchill's theory of support for democracy. Speaking in that short interregnum between the defeat of Nazi Germany and the imposition of the Iron Curtain in Eastern Europe, Churchill told the British House of Commons: "No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is

of the studies' focus on persons in the labor force.

<sup>2</sup> Karl W. Deutsch, *The Nerves of Government* (New York: Free Press, 1963).

<sup>3</sup> For accounts of the problems of survey work within the Soviet Union, see e.g., Vladimir Shlapentokh, *Public and Private Life of the Soviet People* (New York: Oxford University Press), and Tatyana Zaslavskaya, "Perestroika

and Sociology," *Social Research*, vol. 55, no. 1-1, 1988, pp. 267-76.

<sup>4</sup> Stein Rokkan, *Citizens, Elections, Parties* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1970).

<sup>5</sup> Richard Rose, *Ordinary People in Public Policy* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> All survey results quoted here come from surveys reported in full in *Studies in Public Policy (SPP)*, published by the Centre for the Study of Public Policy, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow G1 1XH, Scotland (Fax: 44-41-552-4711). The principal publications are: Richard Rose, *Between State and Market: Key Indicators of Transition in Eastern Europe* (SPP

196); AISA, *Czechs and Slovaks Compared* (SPP 198); NAPOC, *Divisions Within Bulgaria* (SPP 199); and Ammeter-Inquirer, *Poland After the Election* (SPP 201). The State and Market program of surveys is being expanded in 1992 to cover Russia, Hungary and other post-Communist societies. In addition, the CSPP is participating in the New Democracies Barometer surveys of politics and economics in Central and Eastern Europe, including Austria, co-ordinated by the Paul Lazarsfeld Gesellschaft, Vienna.

<sup>7</sup> See Richard Rose, "Escaping Absolute Dissatisfaction: A Trial and Error Model of Change in Eastern Europe," *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1992.

<sup>8</sup> If the percentage giving the economy any positive rating (that is, +1 to 100) is examined, the figures rise in Czechoslovakia from 34% giving a positive rating to the old system to 76% giving a positive rating in five years time; in Bulgaria, from 49% to 86%; and in Poland from 41% to 80%.

**Table 4**  
Performance of Government Assessed

| Question : I'd like to ask your opinion about how a country can be governed. Which statements do you think apply to our system of governing since the revolution? | Bulgaria                     | Czechoslovakia | Poland |
|---|------------------------------|----------------|--------|
|   | (% saying statement applies) |                |        |
| <b>Present system of government</b>   |                              |                |        |
| Everybody free to say what he or she thinks   | 55                           | 83             | 92     |
| Good for country's economy  | 26                           | 30             | 18     |
| Provides good social benefits such as education, health care  | 25                           | 45             | na     |
| Ordinary people can influence government  | 33                           | 27             | 40     |
| Protects country against foreign threats  | 35                           | 23             | 21     |
| Maintains order in society  | 17                           | 16             | 10     |
| Mean  | 32                           | 37             | 36     |

the worst form of government, except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The research reported in this article was supported by an exploratory research grant (SES-9111428) from the National Science Foundation to the Russell Sage Foundation, and by a grant from the British Foreign Office Know How Fund. The Bulgarian survey was conducted by NAPOC (National Public Opinion Center), Sofia, under the direction of Dr. Andrei Raichev and Dr. Kancho Stoychev, who also collaborated in the design of the questionnaire. N=1,159 persons, ages 18-70; Interview dates: June 6-12, 1991. The Czechoslovakian survey was conducted by AISA (Association for Independent Social Analysis), Prague, under the direction of Dr. Marek Boguszak and Dr. Vladimir Rak, who also advised on the development of the questionnaire. N= 1,260 persons, ages 18-70. The Polish survey was conducted by Ammeter-Inquirer, under the direction of Dr. Jerzy Krezlewski of the Institute of Sociology, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan, who also advised on the implementation of the questionnaire in Poland. N=986 persons, ages 18-65. The decision to exclude elderly respondents was made in view

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