POLLING AND DEMOCRACY IN THE FORMER USSR AND EASTERN EUROPE

By Ronald H. Hinckley and Andrew Kohut

Public opinion polling is a product of modern Western democracies, but today it is being practiced quite successfully in former Soviet Bloc countries where democratic traditions are just developing. In a region turned upside down, where one formerly interpreted affairs in terms of who stood next to whom on the review stand atop Lenin's mausoleum, the thought of being able to conduct scientific surveys does seem a little strange. Yet, despite both practical and cultural difficulties in conducting public opinion research in former communist countries, the record of polling so far in detecting the course of events in these emerging democracies has been impressive. Opinion surveys provide insight into the way the winds of change blow in an unpredictable part of the world:

*Polls in the last months of the Soviet Union revealed the lack of support for communism and a vigorous pro-democracy force, which by demography and geography was well situated to oppose the August 1991 coup.

*More recent polling has pointed to a souring democracy in Russia, but few signs that the public is rethinking its distaste for Marxism. Surveys prior to the referendum indicated that Russian President Boris Yeltsin would win, as the Russian public showed a greater distaste for the Soviet-era parliament than for any other institution in post-Soviet society.

*Polls taken in Eastern Europe showed that even before the freedom celebrations ended, many of the former Soviet satellite states would likely become entangled in internal strife. Surveys of Germany disclosed that barely a year after unification, deep internal divisions were straining the country's social cohesion and would likely slow economic recovery in the former communist East.

*And, with no tradition of ethnic multi-culturalism, 40% or more of respondents in every nation of the former Soviet empire openly expressed unfavorable opinions about the principal minority people of that nation, foreshadowing the ethnic strife that has come to pass.

The people of the former Soviet empire face a long and not necessarily irreversible transition to democracy and economic viability. The simultaneous alteration of four fundamental aspects of life (social, economic, political, and psychological) makes this task arduous. US policy has mainly focused on the economic factor; President Clinton's $1.6 billion package to shore up Yeltsin is only the latest example. Many Americans appear willing to go along, at least part way. But what is the public opinion context of such aid in Russia? What can the attitudes of citizens there and elsewhere in the former Soviet empire tell us about how US and western policies will be received?

The answer is: A lot. Survey research throughout the former Soviet empire by the United States Information Agency, the Times Mirror Center, and by many academicians reveals many changes in the cultural landscape emerging in these societies.[1] Deciphering attitude changes not only increases our understanding of what happened in the early stages of transition, but offers a view of what is likely to transpire in the future.

Sharp Country-To-Country Differences

Attitudes toward change differ considerably from country to country. People in neighboring states express divergent views on how a democratic and free market culture is to be achieved. There is no single model that can be uniformly applied throughout the region. Each country must be viewed separately, and policies designed to ease the transition and mitigate negative consequences should be tailored accordingly.

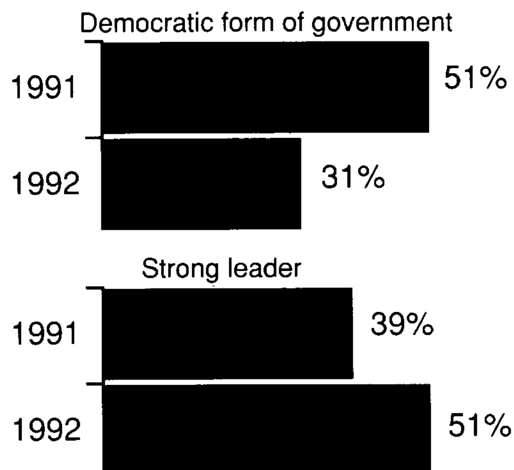
Recent surveys find Russians have soured on democracy. As Figures 1 and 2 show, majorities now favor a strong leader over democratic government, express little sense of political empowerment, and lack confidence in their political and government institutions. Yeltsin's referendum victory was not a strong showing for democracy but the result of support from a loose coalition of dissimilar voters: pro-democrats, who naturally support Yeltsin; those searching for a strong leader, who saw no alternative to Yeltsin; and those who have a greater distaste for the Soviet-era parliament than for Yeltsin. Economic aid can only do so much in this context. Without significant assistance in other areas, Yeltsin's victory may be short-lived.

In the former Yugoslavia, it is significant that official Serbian policies—viewed as irrational by the western world—have been consistent with Serbian public opinion. If Serbian government behavior alone has not made the most sanguine policymaker skeptical of any rational settlement to the crisis, then the Serbian attitudes which drive the behav-

Souring in Russia on the New Politics

Figure 1

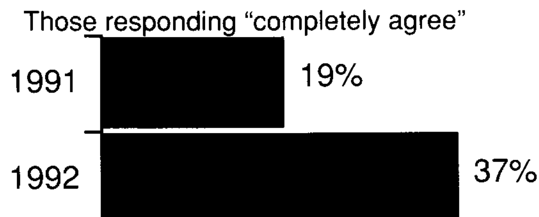
Question: Some feel that we should rely on a democratic form of government to solve our country's problems. Others feel that we should rely on a leader with a strong hand to solve our country's problems. Which comes closer to your opinion?



Note: Questions asked of Russians only.
Source: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates (PSRA) for Times Mirror Center for the People & the Press, latest that of November 1-15, 1992.

Figure 2

Question:...For each statement, please tell me whether you completely agree with it, mostly agree with it, mostly disagree with it, or completely disagree with it...I am losing interest in politics.

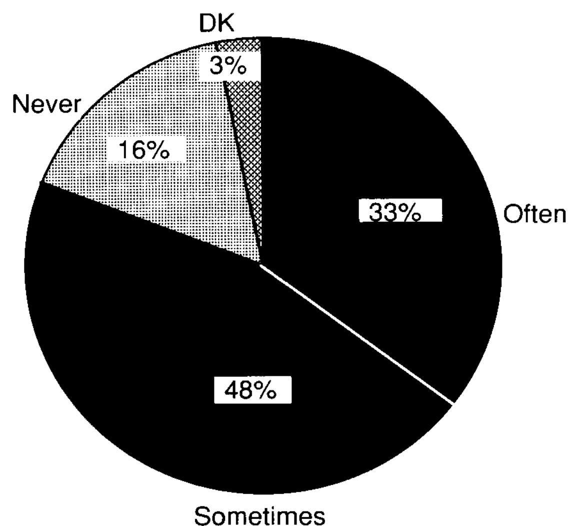


Note: Questions asked of Russians only.
Source: Survey by PSRA for Times Mirror, latest that of November 1-15, 1992.

Dissatisfactions in Eastern Germany

Figure 3

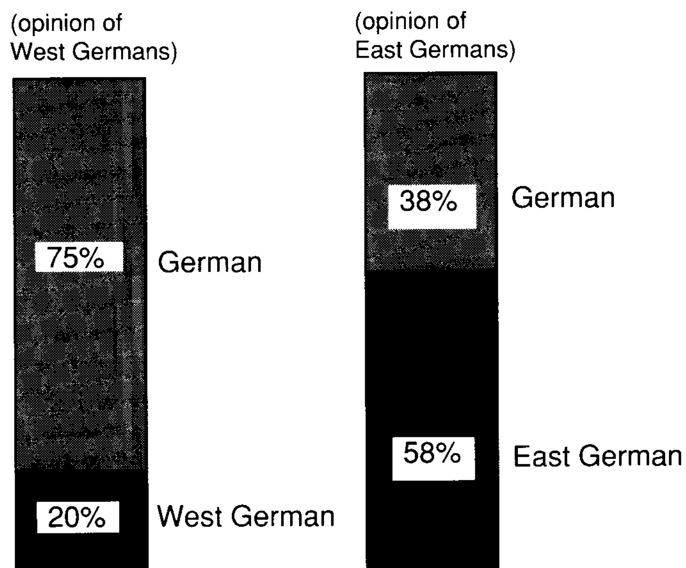
Question: Some East Germans say they feel like second class citizens in Germany today. Do you often, sometimes, or never feel this way?



Note: Opinion of East Germans.
Source: Survey by PSRA for Times Mirror, April 22-May 31, 1991.

Figure 4

Question: How do you most often think of yourself?...as a German or as an East German [asked of East Germans only]/as a German or as a West German [asked of West Germans only]?



Source: Survey by PSRA for Times Mirror, April 22-May 31, 1991.

ior should sound a suitable alarm. Serbs are simply not going to act in a way many westerners want them to.

Unsettled attitudes toward democracy exist throughout Eastern Europe. Contrary opinions among these publics suggest the following contexts for democratization: Czechs have the strongest commitment to reform their society along western political, social, and economic lines, and Romanians the least. Poles and Bulgarians are more open to political reform than Hungarians or Slovaks. However, Hungarians and Slovaks may be more open to free market concepts than Poles and Bulgarians. Poles and Hungarians tend to possess higher levels of tolerance than Bulgarians or Slovaks, which is not saying much in East Europe. Such diversity underscores the need for a separate approach to each country's problems.

The Situation in Russia

These findings warrant a closer look at the attitudes behind them. Surveys in the Soviet Union in 1990 revealed a high degree of opposition to communism. Over half the society rejected the communist system, had little or no confidence in the Communist party, and believed Soviet socialism was bankrupt. They believed that fundamental, radical changes of the existing order were needed. They endorsed freedoms to publish various political views, engage in political demonstrations, and supported the rights of republics to secede from the Soviet Union.

By the time the August 1991 coup attempt occurred, as surveys show, only a minority of the public (20 to 30%) could be counted on to back it. These few, in contrast to the opposition, were largely older, less educated, and from rural areas—physically, psychologically, and politically unable to rally to the side of the "Committee for a State of Emergency." On the other hand, support for democratic rights was strongest among the young, urban, and well-educated—people who tended to be more politically active than defenders of the old order. They lived where opposition to the coup was required—in Moscow and Leningrad, and were motivated through a sense of political empowerment to stand up to the coup leaders.

Recent surveys do not show any solidification of pro-democratic attitudes. Also, there is uncertainty about the economic future and escalating hostility toward a free market. Russians disagree profoundly about private property, with opposition highest to privatizing transportation systems, heavy industry, and major businesses. Of particular concern is a radical drop in support for economic reform among young Russians.

Boris Yeltsin owes his referendum victory in part to the fact that he enjoys more support than democracy does in Russia. His popularity has decreased from its post-coup highs, leveling off at about 55% approval. Exit polls indicated that his better showing in the election was due to support from women, the elderly, and the poorly educated—people who are not part of his core support.

Thankfully for US policy, most Russian democrats support Yeltsin. Those who endorse freedom of expression, find strikes and demonstrations acceptable forms of political behavior, assert the need for a multi-party system, back rapid expansion of private enterprise, and favor foreign investment in Russia also back Yeltsin. Those who do not support these positions generally disapprove of Yeltsin.

Ominously, more than one-third of the Russian population has no firm view on the shape their new society should take. From May 1991 to November 1992, the percent of the Russian population having "no opinion" as to how the society should develop in the future has risen from 14% to 36%.[2] With democratic sentiment in retreat and authoritarian attitudes on the rise, a democratic cultural vacuum looms. Without significant assistance in building the foundations for democracy in Russia, Yeltsin—despite his victory—may be as much of a lame duck today as Gorbachev was in 1991.

Opinion in Serbia

The failure of US policies to end the civil war in Bosnia-Herzegovina rests, in part, with Serbian public opinion. Most Serbs believe they can withstand international sanctions and resent international intervention into what they consider to be their internal affairs. Few are willing to return to pre-war boundaries. In fact, most strongly believe that the acquired territories really belong to Serbia. Serbs hold strong negative views toward other ethnic groups, particularly Muslims, Croats, Albanians, Hungarians, and Slovenians, and toward other nationalities as well, including Americans. Most Serbs voice confidence in the army. There is simply nothing among measured attitudes to suggest that these people will change their ways on their own.

Eastern Germany: Joy and Trauma

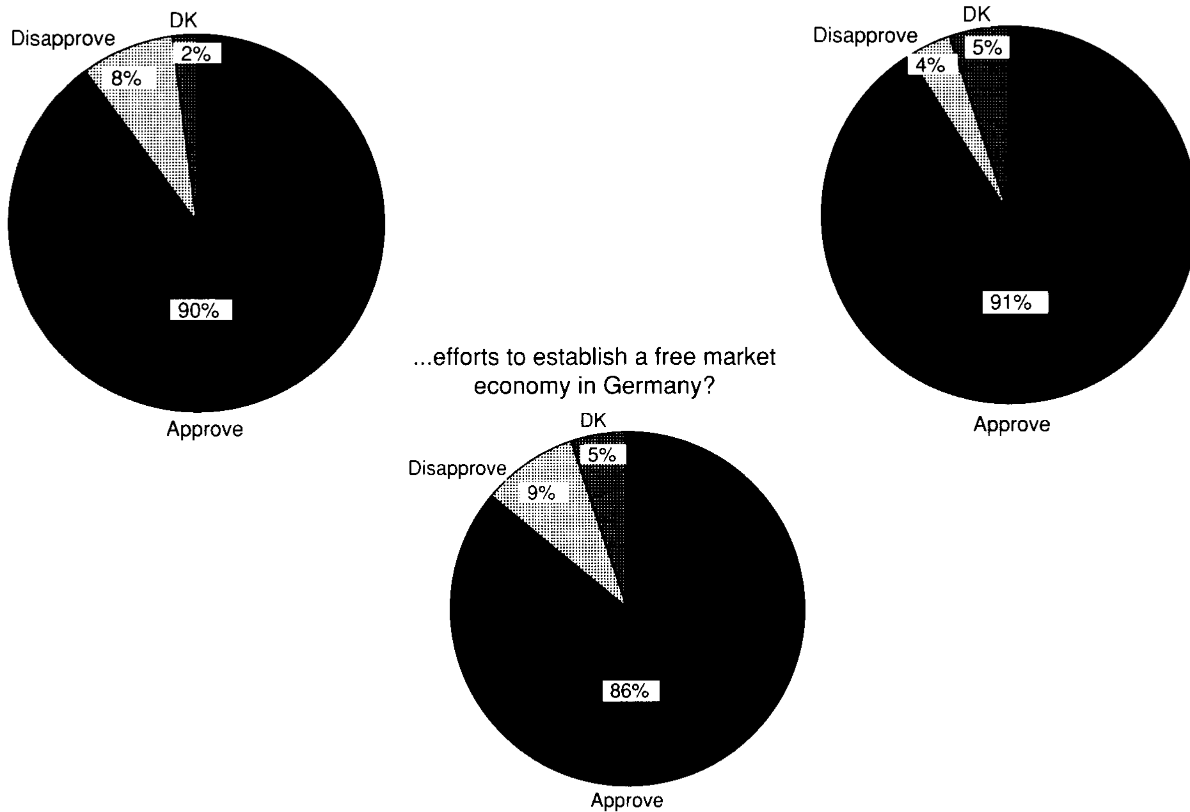
Public opinion in two nations, Germany and Czechoslovakia—one unifying and one dividing in the aftermath of the Velvet Revolution—provides an excellent précis of what is occurring in the rest of Eastern Europe. Early surveys showed that the fall of the Berlin Wall brought joy and trauma alike to eastern Germans. They believed they had won their freedom, but at the expense of an erosion of their quality of life: Their political world had improved, but their economy had suffered. They had expected economic benefits to follow. In polls taken shortly after unification nearly two in three eastern Germans said their lives would take a turn for the better in five years.

Polls, however, show that eastern Germans lack some of the attitudinal prerequisites for political and economic success in a capitalist world. A work ethic, self-confidence, independent thinking and self-promotion are largely absent. Trust and tolerance are in short supply, especially for ethnic minorities. Anti-minority sentiment among eastern Germans runs marginally higher than in the west, but is particularly acute among the young where it runs twenty points higher than the general eastern German population.

Pro-Democracy Attitudes in Eastern Germany

Figure 5

Questions: Overall, do you strongly approve, approve, disapprove, or strongly disapprove of...



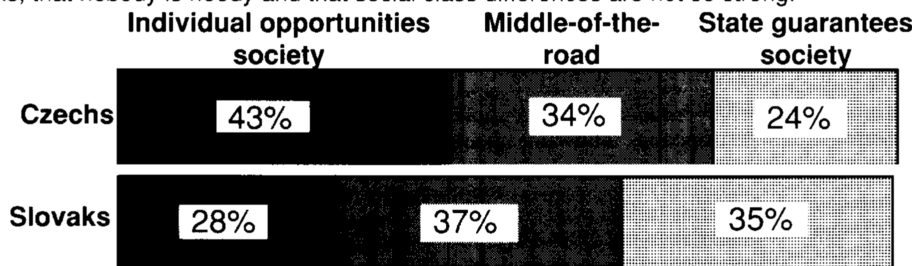
Note: Questions asked of East Germans only.
Source: PSRA for Times Mirror, April 22-May 31, 1991.

Sharp Attitudinal Differences Between Czechs and Slovaks

Figure 6

Questions: Some people say individuals should take more responsibility for providing for themselves. Others say the state should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for. Others have views somewhere in between. How would you place your views on this scale?

Which of these two statements comes closest to your opinion: I find both freedom and equality are important. But if I were to choose one or the other, I would consider personal freedom more important, that is, that everyone can live in freedom and develop without hinderance....Certainly freedom and equality are important. But if I were to choose one or the other, I would consider equality more important, that is, that nobody is needy and that social class differences are not so strong.



Note: Both of these questions are used to calculate where, in these three categories, a respondent should be classified.

Source: Survey by United States Information Agency, December 1992.

While there is no pronounced longing among eastern Germans to return to a communist-type centralized state, 40 years of communism have left an imprint. Eastern Germans have a greater affinity for socialist values than for western ones. They are willing to accept state intervention where westerners would not tolerate it, and they support the idea that the state should guarantee their basic needs rather than that they, individually, should be responsible for themselves. In essence, they appear to be more willing to circumscribe their newly won political freedoms with material guarantees, a sentiment that is strong throughout most of East Europe.

All of this might severely hinder German unification, were it not for other attitudes held by the eastern Germans. As Figures 3 and 4 show, while a sense of being "second class," or just "East German" exists, they still believe in their German heritage. This legacy is enhanced by the emergence of West Germany in the last 40 years from the rubble of war into a formidable free market democracy. The surveys show (see Figure 5) that eastern Germans derive from this history an underlying confidence in the democratic and economic institutions of western Germany. This confidence and commitment to democratic ideals provides a solid attitudinal foundation for a powerful and stable German democracy.

TheCzech-Slovak Split

Despite 70 years of union, the people of Czechoslovakia do not have the common heritage the Germans do to help them through the transition from communism. Figure 6 shows that Czechs and Slovaks see the world through such different eyes that the break up of the Republic was inevitable. Fifty-nine percent of the Czechs think that voting gives common people some say in how the government runs, while only 28% of Slovaks agree with this statement.[3] Czech attitudes make them stand out as already a part of Western Europe, while Slovak attitudes remain more distinctly East European. Czech's favor radical economic reform; Slovaks solidly prefer gradual reform. Twice as many Czechs as Slovaks want most enterprises to be privately run rather than government run. Czechs embrace individual opportunities and responsibility as goals of their society, whereas Slovaks are more likely to opt for a society in which the state would guarantee equal economic benefits for all. Surveys show that Slovaks, along with most East Europeans, are less politically mature, more alienated from democratic processes, feel victimized by the recent revolution, are more fearful of capitalism and foreigners, and are more prejudiced against ethnic minorities.

Despite the voiced unhappiness over the split into the Czech and Slovak Republics (a month prior to the split, more Czechs and Slovaks were "unhappy" with the forthcoming split than were "happy"), both peoples felt that the fundamental differences between the two were too great to produce a compromise solution. Slovaks, like the eastern Germans, were attitudinally unprepared for the fall of communism and the rapid introduction of capitalism and democracy into their society. Unlike the eastern Germans, they had little attitudinally in common with the people with whom they had been politically united.

Minuses...and Pluses

The attitudes which inhibit eastern German and Slovak responses to changes in their societies have begun to spread throughout Eastern Europe. Most East Europeans link democracy with economic prosperity and, hence, judge democratic political reform in terms of their individual economic situations. Since their conditions are generally poor, people express growing dissatisfaction with political reform. Furthermore, confidence in the church and other institutions, except the army, has diminished. East Europeans lack a broad sense of identification as "Europeans," showing instead insularity and ethnocentrism. Finally, they favor efficiency over justice, which may explain the recent electoral victories in some countries of former communists with "expertise" in government and economic management.

At the same time, attitudes that propel eastern Germans and Czechs forward toward reform exist as well—in varying degrees—throughout East Europe. Some people are optimistic about their economic and political future, favor individual responsibility over state guarantees, feel secure from threats by other countries, are tolerant of minorities, and feel personally able to influence political decisions. Generally, the higher the level of education, the greater the presence of opinions which are supportive of democracy and free markets.

Public opinion in the former Soviet empire carries the seeds of democracy, modernization, and economic vitality. It also carries the germs of authoritarianism and totalitarian retrenchment. In many of these states, only the exterior layers of authoritarian systems have been peeled back. The old mind sets need to be replaced by new ones. US policy must provide for more than economic relief. The people must be given tools to help them learn how modern democracies and open economies function. They must develop their own democratic civic cultures.

Endnotes

[1]See, for example, Martha E. McIntosh and Mary P. MacIver, "Coping with Freedom and Uncertainty: Public Opinion in Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia 1989-1992," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, Vol. 4, No.4, 1992.

[2]Survey by PSRA for Times Mirror, latest that of November 1-15, 1992.

[3]Survey by the United States Information Agency, November 1991.

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