

Judy Dempsey finds chaos in the Balkans
Out On A Limb

One year after the revolutions which toppled the communist regimes from power, new divisions are taking place between eastern and western Europe and within eastern Europe itself. The countries of eastern Europe never had deep feelings of mutual solidarity. Age-old antipathies were articulated after the collapse of the Habsburg Empire in 1918. But after the second world war, unity prevailed in the interests of communist solidarity. Today, that unity has disappeared.

The emerging divisions have political and historical roots. As far back as the 1950s, Western governments' attention was primarily focused on 'central Europe.' These countries had articulate, independent opposition movements. They had small but vibrant intellectual communities. They had active diasporas. It is these opposition movements that now nervously hold the reins of power. But at least Western governments sympathise with them.

The Balkan countries - with the exception of Yugoslavia - never had such luck. History was partly responsible. Romania and Bulgaria inherited centuries of misrule and corruption. Promises of land reform during the period between the two world wars evaporated as soon as the hapless peasantry voted in corrupt governments during repeatedly rigged elections.

After 1945, the communists embarked on a rapid and massive programme of industrialisation and modernisation. But it was the peasantry in the Balkans which was the social stratum that facilitated this programme. They were uprooted from the land into large-scale enterprises. The consequences were twofold. First, an artificial working class was created. Precisely because it was artificial, it had no indigenous values. One foot was rooted in the city, the other on the land.

The second consequence of this industrialisation was the creation of an intelligentsia. Unlike the intellectuals, who had been marginalised or

suppressed because the peasantry was catapulted into power and into the bureaucracy, a class was created which became dependent on the state for its survival. The traditions of dependency, conformity and authoritarianism, combined with the conformist and loyal Orthodox Church, ensured the omnipotence of the state.

These traditions help to explain recent developments in Romania and Bulgaria. Because opposition groups had no constituency, they were unable to organise political parties on any grand scale during the elections which were held last May in Romania and June in Bulgaria.

The traditions of conformity, particularly among the bureaucracy, intelligentsia and peasantry, meant that they could make little headway. They campaigned on the platform of the market economy, foreign investment and land reform. The status quo skilfully warned that if the opposition won, they would sell Bulgaria or Romania out to Western capital.

That is why the Bulgarian Socialist Party and the Romanian National Salvation Front did so well. They promised the electorate that the state would provide. Alas, these governments must now eat humble words. They are each asking the European

Community and the Group of 24 industrialised countries to help them as central authority quickly breaks down. That breakdown is the reason for rationing, black-marketing and hoarding. The new governments, desperate to be accepted into the 'New Europe', have had no idea how to construct transitional structures for making the great leap from the state planning system to the market economy or the time to do it. A dangerous vacuum exists. The forced resignation of last November by Andrei Lukanov, the Bulgarian prime minister, confirmed the fragility of the system.

These countries have been encouraged by Western governments to introduce market economies on the understanding that they would receive aid; this has proved to be a false promise. Such assistance, even from the UK-based Know-How Fund, has so far failed to materialise. Romania and Bulgaria are groping in the dark. The longer the delay in providing advice and assistance, the greater the succour for neo-fascist and nationalist movements.

We have already seen how the *Vatra Romaneasca*, the far right-wing movement in Romania, unashamedly echoes the Ceausescu regime in its demands for a pure

Romania. We have seen how *Romania Mare*, a Bucharest weekly, which pours vitriol on the country's intellectuals and its ethnic communities, stokes the fires of the disenfranchised. Acknowledgement by Western governments that these countries are trying to create the institutions for political pluralism might give the fledgling oppositions a chance to regroup.

The countries of 'central Europe' have also failed to lend solidarity. True, these new fragile democracies have their own problems. But Hungary's right-wing Democratic Forum government continues to criticise the

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Romanian government on almost every single issue. Poland, for its part, will now charge Romanians the equivalent of \$20 a day to visit Poland; Austria has reimposed visas for Bulgarians, Romanians and Poles. Such developments are leading to the creation of new divisions in Europe. The 'former' eastern Europe is being divided between central Europe and the Balkans; between reformers and communists; between liberals and authoritarians.

Western and 'central European' governments should shoulder the responsibility for cementing or preventing these divisions. Having waved the carrot of the market economy in front of Bulgaria's and Romania's governments, they should at least show them the way. That means allowing their citizens to travel, and granting scholarships and work permits, so that they can see how other systems function.

It is no irony that the countries with the highest and most unrealistic expectations are those which were prevented from travelling under the communist regimes. Illusions must be shattered. Otherwise the idealism of populism will prosper. ©

