



in Bucharest

Eastern Europe: Too soon to tell

WHILE F W de Klerk is rapidly earning himself a reputation as the Gorbachev of South Africa and the media are quick to draw analogies with events in Eastern Europe, over-simplified generalisations are misleading. In this article, Prof John Barratt of the SA Institute of International Affairs points out that differences between South Africa and Eastern Europe outweigh the similarities, and stresses it is far too early to make comparisons and draw conclusions from events in Eastern Europe.

THE revolutionary change in Eastern Europe in the past six months took the world, including the "experts", by surprise. That there was change in the wind in 1988/89 was clear, but the extent of the change, and particularly its speed, was not predicted. Once again, the course of history has been affected by the element of the unexpected, which should never be underestimated.

The outcome of these events is by no means clear yet because the break-up of the old order is still going on. Other governments, especially in Western Europe, which have to adjust to new circumstances, are still trying desperately to catch up and to determine the implications for themselves and the world in general.

It is likely that no clear pattern will emerge in Eastern Europe for some time, let alone a new political and economic order to replace the old which has lasted (with only a few disruptions) for the past four decades. The old order provided stability of a sort in Europe, but within the sterile framework of the Cold War. Individual countries were caught in a military and economic stranglehold by the Soviet Union.

It is impossible therefore to draw conclusions and to learn clear lessons at this stage from what is happening. It would be very misleading, for instance, to generalise and over-simplify by treating Eastern Europe as a whole. What has happened, and is still happening, is very different from one country to another.

It would also be dangerous to make comparisons with, and deduce lessons for, South Africa, because the differences are much greater than any similarities. Yet we can at least say that the dominant urge for greater democracy is a common factor, and it would be surprising if this did not affect us and many other countries around the world.

How did the movement towards democratisation start?

The Polish people led the way slowly but surely over the past decade, with the persistence of the Solidarity leadership and the great influence of the church. (The election of a Polish pope was undoubtedly a crucial factor.) The appointment of Mikhail Gorbachev as

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general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party in 1985 and the development of his "new thinking" was the catalyst.

Glasnost and perestroika in the USSR generated a tide of new political thinking, which gathered strength as it swept across Eastern Europe, exposing the weaknesses of societies dominated by authoritarian communism. The weaknesses included mounting economic problems, bloated, inefficient and often corrupt bureaucracies and, most seriously, the general incompetence and mediocrity of political leaders who, in virtually all cases, had become self-perpetuating oligarchies, insensitive and unresponsive to the real needs of the people.

They were maintained in power by their security forces and the military protection of the Soviet Union. It was particularly Gorbachev's removal of this threat of intervention (which had maintained communist systems in Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968 and very nearly in Poland in the early 1980s) which made it possible for opposition political groups to promote radical political and economic reform - and even to consider the overthrow of established regimes.

Communist parties bore the brunt of the criticism over economic hardships and the lack of democracy. But in most cases - Romania being a notable exception - reform movements took root even within these parties and the governments they dominated. It is noteworthy that in most cases change has taken place, or is now doing so, through negotiations between political formations, including governing communist parties - as in Po-

it can be neither humane nor democratic because it is based on profit, entrenches inequality and concentrates power in a few hands - is neglected.

Noting that Marxist ideology sees the future state as a "direct democracy in which the task of governing would not be the preserve of a state bureaucracy" and as "an association in which the free development of each is a condition of the free development of all", Slovo asks what went wrong and isolates four main sources of trouble.

The first, and perhaps most important, is the notion of the "dictatorship of the proletariat", dealt with "rather thinly" by Marx as a "transition to a classless society". The assumption was that a degree of repression would be a necessary interim measure to safeguard revolutionary gains from both civil war and capitalist intervention. Rosa Luxemburg warned against this approach, telling Lenin: "Freedom only for the supporters of the government, only for the members of one party - however numerous they may be - is not freedom at all. Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently . . . its effectiveness vanishes when 'freedom' becomes a special privilege."

Lenin disagreed, however, assuming that the repression "necessary" in the immediate aftermath of the revolution would be "relatively mild and shortlived". History proved him wrong. Slovo admits this (how could he fail to?) but baulks at what he calls the "utopianism of the anarchists". He concedes that the "choice of the word 'dictatorship' certainly opens the way to ambiguities and distortions", but continues to support Lenin's position against Luxemburg's wisdom: that the "limited retention of repressive apparatus is justified by the exigencies of the earlier phases". For him it is merely "unfortunate" that the repression became a "permanent feature of the new society" and that the gap between socialism and democracy widened. For Luxemburg it was inevitable.

Slovo has more courage over the three other problem areas: "the steady erosion

Into the mirror of history

From Page 11

of people's power both at the level of government and mass social organisations; the perversion of the concept of the party as a vanguard of the working class; and whether at the end of the day socialist democracy can find real expression in a single-party state".

He asserts flatly that "the concept of a single-party state is nowhere to be found in classical socialist theory", describes it as a "short-cut to political tyranny".

Nevertheless, he condemns the undemocratic practice of communist governments and mass organisations, quoting Hegel (truth is usually born as a heresy and dies as a superstition) and noting: "With no real right to dissent by citizens or even by the mass of the party membership, truth became more and more inhibited by a deadening dogma: a sort of catechism took the place of creative thought. And within the confines of a single-party state, the alternative to active conformism was either silence or the risk of punishment as an 'enemy of the people'."

On the economic front, Slovo condemns the failure of socialism to overcome the "sense of economic alienation inherited from the capitalist past". Committees of bureaucrats simply replaced boards of directors, behaving with the same disregard for democratic accountability and leaving the workers in the same state of powerlessness and alienation.

"State property itself has to be transformed into social property," he says. "This involves reorganising social life as a

whole so that the producers, at least as a collective, have a real say not only in the production of social wealth but also in its disposal."

Slovo concludes by repeating the warning that "we dare not underestimate the damage that has been wrought to the cause of socialism by the distortions we have touched upon" and by stating the commitment of his party both to democratic values and to an ultimate "peaceful progression" towards a socialist South Africa.

Lest there be any doubt, he spells out a commitment to a "post-apartheid state which will guarantee all citizens the basic rights and freedoms of organisation, speech, thought, press, movement, residence, conscience and religion; full trade union rights for all workers including the right to strike, and one person one vote in free and democratic elections".

Obviously, this position must be welcomed, as must the unfortunately rare willingness to address errors and failures in public. There is also scope for debate, notably about "anarchist utopianism", and a need for socialists to move from self-criticism (and criticism of capitalism) to spelling out a programme of action.

It has been to the great detriment of this country that we have been denied the right to hear this voice for so long. May he never be responsible for denying us the voices of others.

Shauna Westcott works in Idasa's publications division.

Business against

By Shauna Westcott

THE RESPONSE of the JSE to Nelson Mandela's early and inevitable reiteration of a commitment to nationalisation is stark evidence of what JCI group economics consultant Ronnie Bethlehem calls "the gap between two worlds".

He characterises the two as "27 million people in ferment whose deprivation needs attention" on the one hand, and on the other "a sophisticated global economy represented at its highest by the United States".

The two worlds don't speak the same language, says Bethlehem, citing a recent "honest but rather primitive" breakfast address to businessmen by Walter Sisulu at which the gap between speaker and audience was "amazing". Yet he adds that "in Lusaka, in Paris, in Harare, one does succeed".

Six points of agreement appear to have emerged from these talks in foreign capitals where representatives of the "two worlds" have managed to communicate:

- That there is a need for a fundamental restructuring of the economy to ensure significant redistribution of wealth;

- That the choice is not between ideological orthodoxies but rather "how to get the mix of a mixed economy right", as the ANC's Pallo Jordan puts it;

- That the structural problems (unemployment, mass poverty, critical shortages of housing, health and education facilities, high population growth, poorly educated and consequently unskilled millions) are immense;

- That there is little or no chance of receiving massive foreign aid, particularly with Eastern Europe presenting an attractive alternative to Western investors;

- That rapid economic growth is necessary - cuts in the defence budget and equalisation of welfare expenditure will not be enough to finance even the most pressing needs;

- That solutions should be constructed co-operatively as far as possible.

While these six points are far from forming an adequate bridge between Bethlehem's "two worlds", they nevertheless represent considerable progress beyond the war of slogans that was the order of the day until the collapse of most of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe.

Progress would be greater were the looming crisis in the capitalist world - real (at least to feminists, ecologists and "Buddhist" economists) despite the scoffing precipitated by its somewhat early anticipation in communist circles - mature enough to force the kind of creative reassessment now current in the socialist world.

For among the problems faced by those

Too soon to tell

From Page 11

land, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria. These communist parties have appreciated that their political systems and economies were becoming inoperable and that the status quo could no longer be maintained.

Although in most cases popular demonstrations played a significant role in influencing governments, it has only been in East Germany and Romania that mass popular action - exodus to the West in the German case and a violent uprising in Romania - was decisive. Contrary to the impression created by dramatic TV coverage of the incidents of mass protest action, it has been the discipline, restraint, tolerance and even sophistication of the process of democratisation, which have been impressive in most cases.

This process is by no means over. In no country of Eastern Europe except Albania does a communist party still claim the sole right to govern, and constitutions are everywhere being changed to allow for multi-party systems. Even in the USSR itself a similar change has been promised, as the tide of democratisation sweeps back from a changing Eastern Europe.

Recognising their current unpopularity, most communist parties are splitting into factions or are transforming themselves into socialist parties closer to Western models in the hope of attracting some electoral support. However, in no country except Poland has a government yet been elected. At the time of writing this article, East Germany and Hungary were preparing to go to the polls (in March). Polls are to follow in Romania in May and in Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria in June.

The tests for democracy are still to come - in the elections themselves and in the subsequent ability of new governments to handle the problems of reconstruction and of fulfilling adequately the popular expectations. Only then will we know whether the reaction against the authoritarianism of former regimes and against the failure of centrally planned economies has led to a widespread rejection of socialist tenets as a whole. This is unlikely, if popular expressions of opinion so far are anything to go by.

It would thus be premature for observers in the West to conclude that all these people have become convinced of the benefits of capitalism, rather than perhaps a liberalised version of socialism. The debate on the relative advantages of different socio-economic systems is far from over in Eastern Europe. There has been no victory of one particular economic system over another. While democracy appears to be flourishing, it is still a delicate flower which needs to be nourished and which could again be trampled underfoot, as in the past, by authoritarianism of the right or the left.