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Special Analysis

CZECHOSLOVAKIA: Teetering Between Old and New

Pressures for change are building slowly, although dissident activity could become more focused and widespread as a result of change in the USSR and elsewhere in Eastern Europe.

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Dissidents, former Dubcek-era politicians, and religious leaders seem more willing than ever to cooperate for political and religious freedoms. Emboldened by the political liberalization elsewhere in the Bloc, they are increasingly vocal in calling for such reforms as freedom of speech and political pluralism. Several times in the past year, thousands of demonstrators have marched in Prague to press their demands, actions that are unprecedented since the 1968 Soviet invasion. Although open defiance of the regime's policies is spreading to a broader spectrum of intellectuals as well as some younger party members, the public for the most part remains apathetic.

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The regime is still dominated by hardliners who, seeing the erosion of Communist authority in Poland and Hungary, oppose liberalization because they fear it will lead to social instability and their losing power. Jan Fojtik, Prague's chief ideologue, has underscored regime concerns by publicly warning of counterrevolution in Hungary. Pragmatists in the lower ranks, spurred by Soviet calls to reform, seem more willing to advocate change, but their strength appears limited.

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Polish Solidarity activists are increasing their contacts with Czechoslovak dissidents and are ready to give them advice and material support. This connection might spark a broader challenge, and the leadership's instinct will be to crack down. Pragmatists in the party seem to be increasingly uncomfortable with such policies, however, and the result may be more vacillation.

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In the absence of strong pressure from the populace or from within the party, President Gorbachev's reforms in the USSR are the major catalyst for change in Czechoslovakia, and against that Soviet backdrop the party rank and file in Czechoslovakia increasingly see their leaders as out of step. The growing gulf between Czechoslovak practice and the Soviet model means that the hardliners' position is likely to erode as opportunists and fence-sitters in the party shift with the winds from Moscow. Preparations for the next party congress in May 1990 are likely to sharpen debate and trigger new pressure from within and outside the party on the Jakes leadership.

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TCS 2871/89

25 July 1989