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Eastern Europe 1994: a Review of Religious Life in Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland

JONATHAN LUXMOORE

Church–State Relations

The relationship between church and state remained subject to dispute throughout Eastern Europe during 1994. Regional differences in the cultural and social position of various Christian denominations were much in evidence, as well as contrasting attitudes to their past and present roles in national life.

In Bulgaria and Romania, small minority Catholic and Protestant communities continued to be overshadowed by much larger Orthodox churches, and to reflect the anxieties and uncertainties felt by small confessional groups.

In Romania, where a disputed 1992 official census put Catholics at 6 per cent of the 22.8 million-strong population, leaders of the Latin and Greek-Catholic communities joined other religious associations in urging legislators to reject demands by the predominant Orthodox Church to be given the status of a ‘national church’ under a new religious law. In a June statement, Professor Dimitru Popescu, dean of Bucharest University’s theology faculty, insisted that Romania’s 12 other registered Christian churches would enjoy equal rights. However, many Christian leaders – including those representing the country’s 1.5 million ethnic Hungarian minority – accused the Orthodox Church, which claims the spiritual loyalty of 87 per cent of citizens, of attempting to block cultural and religious concessions to other denominations.

In neighbouring Bulgaria, religious affairs were dominated by a division between supporters and opponents of the Orthodox church leader, Patriarch Maksim. A National Assembly commission confirmed two years ago that Maksim had been elected uncanonically in 1971 under communist party pressure, but the patriarch has refused to resign, and support for his critics is dwindling. In May backers of the rebel Metropolitan Pimen of Nevrokop, who was excommunicated with three other metropolitans by the Church’s governing synod in 1992, were expelled from an occupied Sofia church. Over 300 schismatic priests reaffirmed their loyalty to Maksim at a ceremony in July.

In both countries, pressure on minority churches was partly attributed to nationalist influences. Having narrowly survived a no-confidence vote in July over its handling of economic reforms, Romania’s Social Democrat-led government under Nicolae Vacaroiu is increasingly dependent on nationalist and excommunist parliamentarians. In local elections in November democratic opposition parties gained less than 10 per cent of the vote.

The fall of Lyuben Berov's government in the wake of summer unemployment protests left Bulgaria with a caretaker government under its first woman premier, Reneta Indzova. With the country's two largest parties, the excommunist Bulgarian Socialist Party and centre-right Union of Democratic Forces, confirming their withdrawal from government, all laws on religious affairs were shelved pending end-of-year elections.

In Hungary and the Czech Republic, by contrast, church-state disputes generally reflected the secular preferences of ruling parties.

In Hungary, all churches surveyed the situation carefully after the landslide victory of the excommunist Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) in May parliamentary elections. During the campaign Catholic Church leaders expressed scepticism about offers of an 'election pact' with Christians by MSZP leader Gyula Horn, and urged Catholics to vote for candidates whose activities 'reflected Christian values'. Although the socialists now hold an absolute majority in Hungary's 386-seat parliament, Catholic and Protestant leaders have played down fears of possible antichurch measures under the MSZP-led government. Some commentators have urged the Catholic Church especially to learn lessons from the defeat of the conservative Hungarian Democratic Forum, which had claimed a special relationship with it while in government. Church-state relations under the new government are expected to be formal and non-committal, with the likelihood of a slowdown in concessions in sensitive areas such as media access and education. In an autumn pastoral letter the Catholic bishops urged citizens to 'reassert the importance of Christian principles in public life' by voting in local elections.

In the Czech Republic a law on church-state relations updating previous decrees is currently being delayed by disputes within the ruling coalition which is led by the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) of premier Václav Klaus. Although the ODS took almost a quarter of the seats in local elections in November and the reformed Czech Communist Party came second with 15 per cent the high showing for independent candidates also suggests that political uncertainty is growing. President Václav Havel, who met the pope during a visit to the Vatican in March as a prelude to hosting a papal pilgrimage in May 1995, has attempted to attenuate church-state disagreements.

In neighbouring Slovakia, where church-state relations had previously been relatively untroubled, the year ended with political confusion following the October election landslide of Vladimir Mečiar's Democratic Slovakia Movement (HDZS). Several EU ambassadors voiced concern at alleged HDZS plans to tamper with press freedom, annul privatisation agreements and question the validity of their opponents' election results. As in the Czech Republic, independent candidates scored well in Slovakia's November local elections. Compared to Mečiar's party, which gained 35 per cent of votes, the conservative Democratic Union of Slovakia's outgoing premier Josef Moravčík is now trailing badly behind the Christian Democrats and ex-communist Democratic Left. In these circumstances, all churches will assess the attitude of Slovakia's new government and parliament cautiously.

Meanwhile in Poland relations between the majority Catholic Church and its political critics, which have been tense for a long time, sank to their lowest point during 1994, despite pledges of cooperation after the September 1993 election victory of parties associated with the former communist regime. In the first months of the year the junior partner in a new coalition government, the Polish Peasant Party (PSL), was widely seen as a potential church ally under its leader, the 35-year-old premier Waldemar Pawlak, but evident distrust between church leaders and the larger cogoverning Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) made confrontation inevitable. In a June declaration on the eve of Poland's local elections the Catholic bishops accused Pawlak's government of 'return-

ing to the style of previous communist regimes' and said that an 'informal alliance' between excommunists and 'various lay groups' was 'threatening national life'. Responding to the charge in an interview, the SLD leader Aleksander Kwaśniewski accused the church of 'failing to reflect' on current changes in the country, adding that a 'necessary compromise' was needed to ensure that 'the church will not be marginalised by the state, nor the state dominated by a superior binding faith'.

On 1 July, tension reached a head when the Sejm (lower house) voted not to ratify Poland's 1993 concordat with the Vatican on the grounds that its enforcement would prejudice the shape of a future national constitution. Although SLD parliamentarians defended the vote with legal arguments the Catholic primate, Cardinal Józef Glemp of Warsaw, angrily condemned the 'obstreperousness and self-confidence' of ex-communist politicians, warning that the church would 'consolidate the forces of believers' in response. In postponing the concordat indefinitely, the SLD could claim to be acting on 1993 pre-election pledges.

The concordat issue was to be only one of many areas of acerbic dispute in 1994. In early summer the health ministry reported that Poland's annual abortion rate had now sunk to below 1,000, compared to 500,000 live births, under a 1993 law which restricts pregnancy terminations to cases in which a mother's 'life or health' is endangered. However, the new law's opponents claimed the figures were incomplete. They also accused the government of failing to comply with accompanying provisions in the 1993 law requiring single mothers to receive 'all necessary help' as well as provisions for sex education in schools and 'unrestricted access' to contraception. On 10 June the Sejm voted by 241 votes to 107, with 122 abstentions, to reintroduce the right to abortions in 'burdensome living conditions'. With opinion polls suggesting that most citizens favoured a relaxation of the 1993 law, the bill was approved by the Senate. But on 4 July it was vetoed by President Lech Wałęsa for 'violating the right to life'. An attempt to overturn the veto narrowly failed in the Sejm during September. Poland became the first European country to oppose a draft multilateral declaration at the UN Population and Development Conference in Cairo the same month, which had provoked international controversy because of its apparent advocacy of artificial methods of birth control.

After the mid-year confrontations, the late summer witnessed tentative attempts to bridge the worst divisions between the church and the secular authorities. However, church leaders continued to criticise developments which they saw as evidence of a hostile political climate. In August two former generals of the Ministry of the Interior were acquitted, after a two-year trial, of involvement in the 1984 murder of Fr Jerzy Popiełuszko. Two agents jailed for the priest's killing were also released in the autumn after serving a third of their original 25-year sentences. In an October pastoral letter the bishops rejected the idea of a 'secular state' as inherently undemocratic, and warned that they would not accept a constitution which failed to guarantee the right to life from conception, the permanence of marriages and religious education in schools. At the end of the year SLD deputies launched a fresh attempt to have a provision requiring 'respect for the Christian system of values' removed from Poland's 1993 Broadcasting Law.

Main Areas of Dispute

In all countries, demands for the return to religious associations of properties seized by the communists continued to cause disputes. These were particularly bitter in the Czech Republic, where the Catholic Church alone has submitted claims to 3,400 buildings and 177,500 hectares of land. Attempts by the Klaus government to restrict

the scale of restitutions has prevented progress on other church–state issues. In February Archbishop Jan Graubner of Olomouc accused the ODS of resorting to ‘solutions even worse than communist ones’: it had withdrawn the state funding which had been available for church activities in the communist period without restoring the churches’ means of livelihood. Property disputes were prominent in talks between government officials and the visiting Vatican Secretary of State, Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran, in October.

Hungary’s Catholic Church still awaits government decisions on 3,000 reclaimed buildings, in addition to the 700 already restored to it. Meanwhile in Romania the Transylvania-based Greek-Catholic Church, relegalised five years ago, has received back only a small handful of its 2,000 prewar places of worship, most of which were handed to the majority Orthodox Church when the Greek-Catholic community was outlawed in 1948. In an open letter in October Romania’s Catholic bishops protested against the refusal of the Vacaroiu government to intervene in what the government sees as an interchurch conflict.

Another ubiquitous area of dispute has been that of education. Hungary’s Catholic, Reformed and Lutheran Churches currently run 171 educational institutions between them, representing around 3 per cent of the national total compared to 60 per cent before the Second World War. The Catholic Church has the largest share, with 34 gymnasias and trade schools, 54 primary schools, 19 kindergartens and one handicapped school. A Catholic university opened at Pilicsaba in October; a second such university, run by the Reformed Church in Budapest, still awaits government recognition. Most other former church schools are due to be returned by the year 2001, bringing the churches’ combined total to 6 per cent. However, church-run education remains a sensitive political issue. Education spokesmen from the cogoverning Alliance of Free Democrats demanded in October that an early 1994 agreement be amended to remove state funding from church schools.

The Romanian parliament voted in June to make religious education classes obligatory in all state schools; but minority church schools remain subject to restrictions. In their October open letter the Catholic bishops urged the government to bring its policies into line with those of other Eastern European countries. Similar complaints about legal discrimination against church-run schools were made during July by Slovakia’s Catholic bishops.

By the start of Poland’s 1994–5 school year in September, 93 Catholic schools had been revived nationwide, the latest ranging from a Jesuit high school in Gdynia to the first parish school for Gypsies in Suwałki. The church has a Catholic university in Lublin, which remained open throughout the communist period, as well as a university-level Catholic theology academy in Warsaw and theology institutes in several dioceses. Meanwhile in October Opole University became the first state institution to open its own theology faculty since the faculties in Warsaw and Kraków were dissolved after the war. Poland’s 90,000-strong Lutheran Church has five schools. Other religious groups with educational institutions of their own include the Jews, who reopened their first school in Warsaw last September, and the Hare Krishnas, who have a registered school for two pupils in Piaseczno.

There have been several promising developments recently in ecumenical relations, although there are still problems because of entrenched attitudes.

In Romania, the youthful Orthodox Archbishop Daniel of Iași, seen as a possible successor to Patriarch Teoctist, has continued to urge interchurch cooperation. During his first pastoral visit to Orthodox parishes in Hungary Teoctist himself called for measures to ease the two countries’ longstanding minority tensions. However, Greek-

Catholic and Hungarian Reformed communities in Romania complained that nationalist pressure was still being exerted on them without protest by Orthodox leaders.

In March, Hungary also hosted a visit by Patriarch Aleksii II of the Russian Orthodox Church, in the course of which he apologised 'in Russia's name' for the 1956 Soviet invasion. Hungary's Catholic, Reformed and Lutheran Churches have also shown a growing readiness to cooperate in defence of shared rights and interests. During 1994 they announced plans for a joint exhibition at Budapest's EXPO-96 originally planned for next year.

In eastern Slovakia, conflict continues over the distribution of Orthodox and Greek-Catholic churches, as well as over alleged shortcomings and inadequacies in the Catholic Church's work among the republic's large ethnic Hungarian and Gypsy minorities. However, Catholic leaders have attempted to calm the nationalist feeling aroused by the five-year controversy over Slovakia's wartime president Fr Jozef Tiso, in part by supporting a reexamination of his record by an independent historical commission.

In the Czech Republic, the Catholic Church has urged reconciliation with Germany, while leaders of all Christian denominations have also backed property restitution demands by the surviving Jewish community. A highlight of the year was a Czech-German-Jewish ecumenical reconciliation service at the former Terezin concentration camp in July. In January the Czech Republic's Catholic, Evangelical and Hussite Churches signed a historic agreement to recognise each other's baptisms. The Hussite Church established its own autonomous diocese in Slovakia during the summer, while the pope welcomed continuing work on the martyred reformer Jan Hus (1369-1415) during President Havel's March visit to the Vatican. In November Czech and Slovak Catholic bishops held their second joint meeting since their countries separated two years ago.

In Poland, the first Institute for Catholic-Jewish Dialogue after that of Switzerland was launched in Warsaw during the autumn, while preparations were also made for an ecumenical Bible with the country's Protestant and Orthodox Churches. Complaints from minority confessions that the Polish-Vatican Concordat would give the majority church unfair privileges were followed by parliament's adoption of new laws governing relations with the Lutheran and Calvinist Churches. Similar laws, guaranteeing the right to teach in schools and have access to state institutions, are expected in 1995 for the Methodists, Baptists and Adventists, as well as the break-away Polish Catholic Church. Among other 1994 achievements: Polish Catholic missionaries were among the first to return to the war-torn African state of Rwanda after the tribal massacres; a Polish priest was nominated for a major international human rights award for his work among AIDS victims; and a Polish bishop was awarded a 'Righteous among the Nations' medal by Israel for saving Jewish lives during the Holocaust.

The Work of Reconstruction

Efforts have continued throughout the region to rebuild the churches' battered infrastructures.

In the Czech capital, a highlight of the year was the appointment of Archbishop Miloslav Vlk as a cardinal in November, bringing to 12 the number of resident cardinals able to speak internationally on behalf of Eastern Europe.

The return of chaplains to Hungary's armed forces was agreed by parliament before the May elections. Catholic and Reformed church field bishops were appointed during the year. Priests were also assigned for army chaplaincy duties dur-

ing the year in Slovakia, Romania and the Czech Republic pending formal legislation in all three countries.

In Poland, where the Catholic military chaplaincy network, reestablished five years ago, currently numbers 230 priests under Brigadier-General Bishop Sławoj Leszek Głódź, SLD members accused the church of exerting an 'excessive influence' within the armed forces. However, a second military bishop also began work with 13 priests during the year – for Orthodox soldiers and conscripts serving from eastern Poland.

Although most churches in Eastern Europe are critically short of pastors there are signs that postcommunist religious communities are making the most of their meagre resources and maintaining popular respect as coherent voices against rising crime, abortion and divorce rates, as well as against periodic nationalist and intercommunal tensions.

Estimates continue to vary, however, as to the deeper religious commitment of local Christians. In Poland, the Catholic Church maintains an extensive network of charitable institutions, and has well-developed specialist pastorates for social and professional groups. However, some Catholics have voiced worries about its declining influence among the 15–29 age-group which makes up 20 per cent of the country's 38.5 million-strong population, as well as about an apparent decline in church sympathies among intellectuals and a widespread selectiveness in religious practices, with many churchgoing Catholics opting to ignore or minimise the church's moral injunctions. In a September television survey 98 per cent of Poles described themselves as religious believers, with around half claiming to attend church at least once a week. Other polls, however, have confirmed a sharp fall in trust and respect for the church, from the 92 per cent recorded in late 1989 to 62 per cent in July 1994. The year also witnessed the first signs of a fall in church attendance, a decline in admissions to female orders and increasing vandalism and desecration at the country's largely unprotected religious sites.

The most recent census in Hungary put Catholics at 66 per cent of the 10.7 million-strong population, and Lutherans and Calvinists together at 22 per cent. Although 80 per cent of citizens in an April survey felt loyalty to one of the churches, with a quarter claiming to practise regularly, the figures were greeted with scepticism.

Catholics comprise 40 per cent of the Czech Republic's 10.4 million citizens, according to a 1993 government survey, with the five other largest mainstream Christian confessions totalling barely a tenth as many together. The first survey for half a century, however, conducted last summer, suggested low religious observance rates, ranging from less than 1 per cent in Litoměřice to 8 per cent in Olomouc.

In Slovakia, by contrast, there are signs that Christianity remains a mass phenomenon. Summer pilgrimages to the Catholic shrines of Šaštín, Lutina and Levoča were well-attended, while a new site of alleged Marian apparitions, at Litmanova in the Tatra mountains, hosted up to half a million at its fourth anniversary in August.

In an important development, Catholic bishops from throughout Eastern Europe attended their first regional meeting in Warsaw in mid-October, as well as a follow-up November meeting in Częstochowa. Both gatherings, which follow other bilateral and multilateral contacts, were unofficially said to have marked initial steps towards the creation of a region-wide forum to coordinate Catholic church affairs in Eastern Europe. Protestant communities in various parts of the region have also forged closer contacts, and have shown a growing readiness to confront current challenges together by pooling expertise and resources.