A decade after seizing their destinies, the former East Bloc countries are struggling to emerge from an intellectual dark age for disciplines once subjugated to serve the state

Eastern Europe's Social Science Renaissance

Under the guise of scholarship, the mission of the Institute of Scientific Atheism of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, located in the heavily Catholic city of Brno, was to generate philosophical arguments supporting the notion that religion only interferes with the upward march of communism. When authorities finally swept the institute into history's dustbin in 1993, a few of its staff members who had done research on public attitudes toward religion found a haven at the University of Brno. Many of the rest, the political idealogues, turned their talents to business. "People like that often had good commercial instincts," academy sociologist Michal Illner notes dryly.

Devoted more to propaganda than research, dozens of institutes like the one in Brno littered the landscape when eastern Europe threw off nearly a half-century of Soviet control in 1989. Although some of these countries had managed to sustain world-class work in such areas as math, physics, and chemistry, disciplines at the heart of the social sciences—perceived as threats to the communist regimes—were subverted or allowed to languish. But now, although resources are still perilously scarce, eastern Europe, with massive help from institutions in the West, is resurrecting its social sciences. Tended by hosts of visiting scholars and money from private foundations, new institutions designed to help these countries blossom as capitalist democracies are sprouting like tender shoots on a fire-ravaged field. Indeed, eastern European social scientists have no more rewarding subjects for study than themselves as the area undergoes an unprecedented social and economic transformation. "These are golden times" for the social sciences, says Illner.

A daunting challenge is to direct the energies of the next generation to where they are sorely needed. The brightest new Ph.D.s are neither in academia teaching nor in government drawing up enlightened policies. Instead, they are heading for the private sector, where the money and prestige are. Princeton economist Orley Ashenfelter worries that, without the services of people trained in modern economics, political science, and other policy-making fields, architects of post–Cold War societies in eastern Europe are "trying to build bridges without any engineers."

Ideological Trojan horses

In 45 years under Soviet dominion, eastern Europeans had very little contact with Western social science. Economics was Marxist economics—heavy on history, light on equations; sociology was virtually banned from many university curricula; and political science served as a conduit for communist lecturing. Young politicians in Poland, for example, would attend the Communist Party's Higher School of Social Science, where they would learn about class struggles and the "dialectic" between historical forces driving societies ever closer toward communist ideals. In classes with names such as "Scientific Communism" and "Historical Materialism," professors expounded on a society based on the marriage of science and socialism, says science historian Loren Graham of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Economists for tomorrow. Students and faculty at Prague's new Center for Economic Research and Graduate Education.

But serious intellectual activity fermented beneath the surface. In Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, there were "islands of freedom" in some social science fields, says Josef Syka, vice chair of the R&D Council of the Czech Republic, especially in the research academies where, quarantined from students, top scholars were able to pursue unorthodox inquiries.

While Czech scholars kept a handful of social science disciplines—such as ethnography and linguistics—alive in their academy, colleagues in Poland maintained a far more extensive clandestine culture that has helped them emerge from the intellectual dark ages. "If you were rejected by the official system, you could go underground" to publish books and papers, called bibula, on censored topics such as anticommunist uprisings abroad and the dismal performance of Marxist economies, says Polish political scientist Marek Kaminski of New York University and the University of Warsaw's Central and East European Economic Research Center. Such activities did entail a risk: Kaminski spent 5 months in jail in 1985 for managing the publishing venture for Solidarity, the union movement born in the Gdansk shipyards in 1980 that, by the end of the decade, had toppled the government.

Poland's avant-garde movement provided a lifeline to Western thought for researchers in other countries, too. In sociology, Polish translations of Western literature and other publications "became an ideological Trojan horse" in eastern Europe, says Edmund Mokrzycki of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

While Poland spread the subversive gospel on sociology, Hungary was able to sustain a decent reputation in economics, partly due to its strong tradition in mathematics. Politics too played a role. In 1968, Hungary spiced its centrally planned economy with free-market mechanisms, an experiment often referred to as "goulash communism." "Hungarian economists made names for themselves explaining what was wrong with the communist system," says economist Janos Kornai, who divides his time between Harvard University and a Hungarian think tank, Collegium Budapest.

The new shoots

But whatever intellectual capital eastern Europeans possessed, they faced awesome obstacles after seizing their destinies a decade

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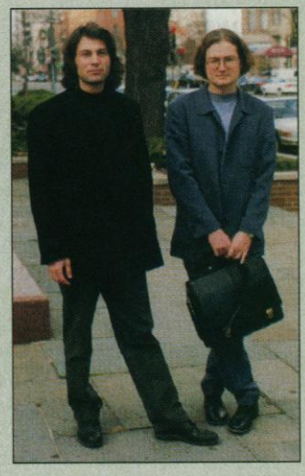
Bright Spots in a Bleak Russian Landscape

Harley Balzer recalls vividly the signs of "enormous damage" to Russia's social sciences inflicted by decades of disinformation and inept Soviet policies. When he attended a conference on "civil society" last summer in St. Petersburg, says Balzer, director of the Center for Eurasian, Russian, and East European Studies at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., "I was appalled at the lack of ability to think systematically" among some of the country's top social scientists. "Essentially the discussion was mush."

Its economy in tatters, Russia trails many of its former satellites in pulling the social sciences from the ideological morass into which they sank during the Soviet era. Many universities are repackaging old, dogma-riddled courses, notes Irina Dezhina, a public policy analyst at Moscow's Institute for the Economy in Transition. For example, she says, a standard course once called "the Scientific Approach to Communism" is now called "the Social and Economic History of the 20th Century." But the teachers often "teach exactly the same stuff" as before. A streak of nationalism in the intellectual community also threatens to undermine reform, says science historian Loren Graham of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). "There are still quite a few Russian scholars who believe Western social science and humanities represent a certain ideological viewpoint which they don't wish to embrace," he says.



Young pioneers. Vadim Volkov (left) and Oleg Kharkhordin, faculty members at European University in St. Petersburg.

Nonetheless, some beacons have appeared on the horizon—think tanks, renewed departments in universities, and freestanding institutions for graduate education. As in eastern Europe (see main text), reformers are pushing innovation more than conversion. "While things are bleak, there are bright spots," says Kennette Benedict of the MacArthur Foundation, who says much of the initiative—and most of the cash—is coming from outside the country. One high-profile endeavor was cooked up by Israeli economist Gur Ofer of Hebrew University in Jerusalem, a prominent expert on the Soviet economy, along with Valery Makarov, director of the Central Economics Mathematics Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Together they designed and launched the New Economic School (NES), a graduate school that opened in Moscow in 1992. Supported by the MacArthur and Ford Foundations and international financier George Soros, the NES, headed by Makarov, awards about 40 master's degrees a year, preparing Russians to enroll in top-notch Ph.D. programs abroad. The first fruits have just come in: Two newly minted Ph.D.s—one from Harvard, one from MIT—are now at the Stockholm Institute for Transition Economics, studying how to integrate Russia into the world economy.

Also making a mark is the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences, founded by Teodor Shanin, a prominent Russian rural sociologist who spent most of his career at Manchester University in the U.K. before taking leave to return to Moscow and run the school. A star faculty member is sociologist Tatiana Zaslavskaia, whose pathbreaking public opinion surveys in the early days of *glasnost*—revealing widespread demoralization, apathy, and economic distress in the Soviet Union—won her a position as adviser to former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

Fresh students are treated like tabulae rasae at the European University, a new independent private graduate institution in St. Petersburg organized by sociologist Boris Firsov and supported entirely by money from the MacArthur, Ford, and Soros Foundations. It now has about 210 students pursuing M.A.s or Ph.D.s in everything from economics to ethnology. Teaching students to think analytically is the number-one priority, says Vadim Volkov, dean of the faculty of political sciences and sociology: "Basically, we retrain them and resocialize them." The Russian faculty are young—mostly in their early 30s—and all were trained in the West, says Volkov, 33, who earned his doctorate at Cambridge University. The students must be fluent in English and, in a break from Russian tradition, spend much of their time writing instead of preparing for rote oral exams.

Experts hope these fledgling efforts will sow the seeds for an indigenous crop of world-class social scientists. And there's more to come. Last November, the MacArthur and Carnegie Foundations held a meeting to map out future support strategies for the social sciences in the former Soviet Union. One theme of the meeting, according to Volkov, is that communism is so deeply rooted in Russia that "total rejection of the past is impossible and unwise," so more attention should be given to promoting "gradual transformation from within" at universities and academies throughout Russia's regions.

So far, the initiatives in Russia have resembled intensive-care patients hooked to an array of tubes—their survival depends on infusions of foreign funds. Even before last summer's financial crisis, it was hard—in a country with no tradition of private philanthropy—to rally Russian support for these institutions. Russia needs not just money but time to move past parochial attitudes that are as stifling as Marxist dogma, says Balzer: "Russia is still a country where they make a distinction between world science and 'fatherland' science." **–C.H.**

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ago. The biggest problem was a one-two economic punch. Accompanying the wrenching shift to the free market—and the loss of captive consumers in the Soviet Union—have been steep drops in government support for research and education. In Hungary, for example, R&D spending has slid from 1.8% of the total budget in 1989 to 0.7% in 1997, even as the budget itself has shrunk, says Andras Roboz, science attaché to the Embassy of Hungary in Washington, D.C.

A more insidious obstacle to reform, says Kaminski, is the persistence of "petrified hierarchies" in universities and academies. Budget woes have made inroads there, making it easier to purge resistant outposts of communist ideology, says Petr Kratochvil of the Czech Academy of Sciences, where severe budget cuts enabled officials to kill 25 institutes—including the one for scientific atheism and the Lysenko-tinged Institute of Developmental Biology—and reduce the staffs by half. But universities are still home to "a lot of tenured deadwood" who balk at change, says Polish political scientist Karol Soltan, now at the University of Maryland, College Park.

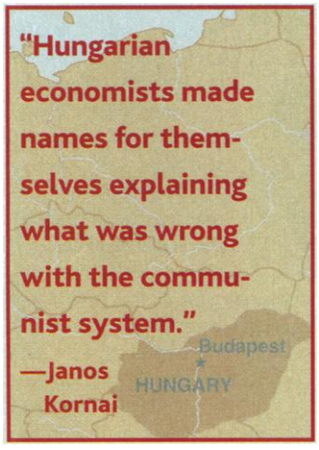
Aware of the stultifying legacy of the communist system, experts early on concluded that the most effective way to reorient social sciences would be to create new institutions, or new departments in old ones, rather than try to redirect existing entities.

The first big initiative came in 1991, when billionaire financier George Soros founded the Central European University (CEU) in Budapest, now supported with a 20-year commitment from Soros's Open Society Institute. Housed in a restored baroque

palace in the heart of Budapest, CEU has about 60 faculty members, plus dozens of visiting Western professors who lecture on everything from international affairs to "gender and culture." CEU is the "crown jewel" of postcommunist higher education initiatives, says Andrew Kuchins, associate director of Stanford's Center for International Security and Arms Control. CEU, adds Kornai, is "a very good sign that you have something outside the state-run hierarchy of higher education and research."

CEU's major achievement so far has been to furnish people with master's degrees that set them up to qualify for Ph.D. programs abroad, usually in the United States or Britain. Twenty graduates are now at Stanford, which has a special program for eastern European students, says sociologist Laszlo Bruszt, chair of the CEU board. The university, which has a sociology department in Warsaw, intends to reach deeper into the pipeline of young social scientists by establishing an undergraduate college as well.

Another promising growth on the postcommunist landscape is a new school in the Czech Republic. A joint venture of Prague's noted Charles University and the Czech Academy of Sciences, the Center for Economic Research and Graduate Education–Economics Institute was designed with the ambitious aim of creating "the next economic elite," according to co-founder Jan Svejnar, who shuttles between Prague and a post at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. The center, started in 1991, awards U.S.–style Ph.D.s in economics, sponsors research, and holds seminars for government and business people. The goal is to sprinkle economists throughout academia, the government, and the private sector, says Svejnar.



The center, whose professors do both research and teaching, is drawing raves. "It's the only institution of its kind anywhere in eastern Europe," says Hungarian-born economist Richard Quandt of Princeton University, who runs an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation program that subsidizes the school. "They are really producing Western-style Ph.D.s." His colleague Ashenfelter says the graduates are getting "snapped up by the world market" for positions in government and international finance.

Most of the new initiatives, however, come in more modest packages. Take the Institute for Social Studies (ISS) at the University of Warsaw, established in 1991. Affiliated with the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research in Ann Arbor, ISS does research and graduate training in sociology, economics, political science, and psychology. Since 1992, it has also run the Polish General Social Survey, which Kaminski calls "the most methodologically advanced project in empirical sociology in eastern Europe." Modeled on the U.S. General Social Survey, it involves annual interviews with 2000 Poles to track values, beliefs, health, and well-being.

Looking to youth

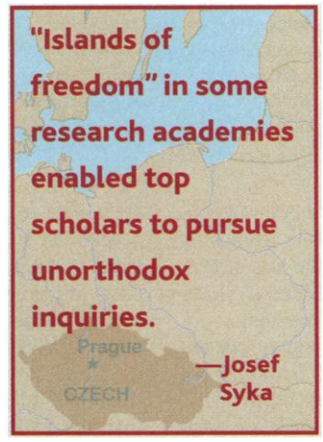
As with institutions, it seems to be easier to form than reform individuals, observers say. "We found it is virtually impossible to retrain any of the existing economists," says Svejnar. Those styled in the Marxist tradition, he says, "basically found it too difficult" to adapt to rigorous, math-based methodologies.

Quandt and others are placing their hopes on the next generation. In the Czech Republic, university enrollment has doubled since 1989, and new campuses have proliferated, says Syka. Regionwide, the social sciences appear to be keeping pace. In the first half of the 1990s, the ranks of Hungarian university students in economics and social sciences swelled by more than 150%, while tripling in Poland, says Tamas Tarjan of the Institute of Economics in Budapest.

A major problem, however, is that these freshly minted social scientists are not going into jobs where their skills may be needed most—in academia and in government, where they could tend the machinery for a democratic society. Universities, with their rock-bottom salaries, no longer carry the prestige they did under communism. "Higher education in eastern Europe is a totally unmitigated disaster," says Polish economist Stanislaw Wellisz, who teaches at both Columbia and Warsaw universities. Although governments are putting high priority on expanding the availability of higher education, "professors come last in the pecking order," he says, noting that "a full professor earns about the same salary as a janitor. ... If you are bright and have any ambition, you are not going to go into academic life." That's bad news for students, Wellisz says: "Faculty members treat their academic position as a base for ... other work and, therefore, devote very little time to teaching and to research."

Channeling fresh talent into the government is also difficult. According to Quandt, the Mellon Foundation funded an economics honors program at Warsaw University designed to prepare students to go abroad for Ph.D.s and then come back to "put Polish economics on its feet." Instead, he says, "95% of the graduates got such incredible offers" from banks and companies that they never went on for Ph.Ds.

Countries must battle external as well as internal brain drains. In Poland, says Wellisz, "the brightest ones go for graduate study abroad and stay abroad." Most eastern European universities aggravate the problem by failing to take obvious steps such as aggressively recruiting rising stars, says Hungarian sociologist Ivan Szelenyi, now at the University of California, Los Angeles. He says three of his best Hungarian students at UCLA have been snapped up for tenure-track jobs at top U.S. schools. "If my colleagues in Hungary would listen to me, they would create fast tracks for these people. They would offer a chair and full professorship," says Szelenyi.



Observers say it will take many years to heal the deep wounds in eastern Europe's social sciences. "The way mathematicians survive in Poland is very simple: They do subcontracting work for Silicon Valley" while retaining their faculty positions, says Wellisz. But when social scientists enter the private sector, he says, they are lost to the world of teaching and scholarship. Some believe it will take a generation for modern social science to gain a firm foothold in eastern Europe. Wellisz offers a more pessimistic view: "Unless the [educational] system is changed, it will take an infinity."

—CONSTANCE HOLDEN