

### Soviet Society in the 1980s: Problems and Prospects

#### Key Judgments

*Information available  
as of 30 November 1982  
was used in this report.*

Both Western observers and Soviet officials recognize that the Soviet Union now faces a wide array of social, economic, and political ills including a general social malaise, ethnic tensions, consumer frustrations, and political dissent. Precisely how these internal problems will ultimately challenge and affect the regime, however, is open to debate and considerable uncertainty. Some observers believe that the regime will have little trouble coping with the negative mood among the populace. Others believe that economic mismanagement will aggravate internal problems and ultimately erode the regime's credibility, increasing the long-term prospects for fundamental political change.

Whatever the ultimate prognosis, these problems will pose a challenge for the new Soviet leadership. The Politburo's approach probably will be based on its assessment of the threat posed and the degree to which these issues can be addressed by policy shifts. Three broad categories of problems—the quality of life, ethnic tensions, and dissent—are surveyed in this paper. Of these, popular discontent over a perceived decline in the quality of life represents, in our judgment, the most serious and immediate challenge for the Politburo. According to [ ] sources, the Soviet people are no longer confident that their standard of living will continue to improve. Popular dissatisfaction and cynicism seem to be growing. This popular mood has a negative impact on economic productivity and could gradually undermine the regime's credibility. Such discontent has already led to some isolated strikes and demonstrations, developments that immediately get the leadership's attention. Other manifestations of discontent—crime, corruption, and alcoholism—are evident as well but pose no direct challenge to the regime. Such ills, nonetheless, have a detrimental effect on Soviet economic goals, are harmful to the social climate in general, and in turn are made worse by the slow rate of economic growth.

Ethnic discontent—rooted in cultural, demographic, and economic problems as well as political suppression—remains primarily a latent but potentially serious vulnerability. Currently, there is no widespread, politically disruptive protest or dissent among the Soviet nationalities. The regime's policies—granting to national minorities some linguistic, territorial, cultural, and administrative autonomy; raising the standard of living; expanding the educational base; and using overwhelming police power when needed—have been largely successful so far. Although the potential for political unrest and sporadic violence in the Baltic republics remains

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high because of economic, demographic, and cultural grievances, Baltic concerns have little impact elsewhere in the USSR and can be suppressed if necessary. With more time (perhaps decades), however, similar problems could become much more consequential in Muslim Central Asia, requiring the regime to manage this problem more adroitly.

Finally, the range of political, religious, and cultural discontent that is expressed in the Soviet dissident movement does not, at present, seriously challenge the regime's political control, but the regime deals with it as if it does. Soviet dissidents cause concern because they have an international audience and their activities embarrass the regime. Moreover, the leadership remains psychologically insecure and is unwilling to allow any hint of challenge to its authority, apparently because it fears such dissidents could appeal to a wider audience by articulating more widely held discontent over food shortages and the like. For these reasons, the regime, particularly of late, has used widespread arrests and imprisonment of dissident leaders, confinement in psychiatric hospitals, and exile to crush the movement. The movement, however, is not likely to die and in the long run could grow if it can capitalize on increasing discontent, cynicism, and alienation among the populace.

The sharp slowdown in economic growth since the mid-1970s is the underlying problem that ties all these issues together and makes them potentially more troublesome for the regime. Unless this trend is reversed, increasing alienation and cynicism, especially among young people, are likely; and other social ills—crime, corruption, alcoholism—could get worse. The regime, to be sure, has impressive resources for trying to deal with particular economic problems—especially in its centralized control over priorities and resources, but a return to the more favorable economic conditions of the 1960s and early 1970s, when there were substantial improvements in the standard of living, is highly unlikely. The pervasive police powers at the Politburo's disposal, when coupled with the Soviet populace's traditional passivity toward deprivation and respect for authority, should, however, continue to provide the regime with the necessary strength to contain and suppress open dissent.

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Difficult decisions regarding resource allocation and new management approaches, nevertheless, will probably be needed to deal with the Politburo's economic problems and to reverse the malaise that has set in. How the new leadership will handle these issues over the long run is uncertain. Its policy options range from undertaking major "reforms" and reallocating resources away from defense to greater reliance on administrative controls and repression. Some mix of policies involving both directions might be attempted. No solutions it is likely to attempt, however, offer any certain cure for its growth problem and the malaise related to it. This situation will likely require the leadership to fall back even more on traditional orthodox methods to control dissent and suppress challenges to its authority while continuing efforts to avoid an overall decline in a "quality of life" that has become the regime's real basis for legitimacy.

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