

GAO

Testimony



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Refugees from Eastern Europe

Statement of  
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Before the Subcommittee on Immigration  
Refugees, and International Law,  
Committee on the Judiciary,  
House of Representatives



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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

We are here today at your request to present information recently obtained in Washington, D.C., and Europe concerning patterns of emigration from Eastern European countries. Though somewhat random, the subcommittee staff believed this information would be helpful as you consider the situation of East Europeans and related U.S. refugee policies and admissions.

As you know, remarkable changes have been taking place during the past year, even the past few weeks, in several Eastern European countries that have traditionally been refugee-producing countries. Changing political circumstances in Poland have led to increasing opportunities for Poles to travel to other countries. The Hungarian government's recent declaration that it is now a democratic republic, the opening of its border with neighboring Austria, and its recognition by the United Nations as a country of first asylum for refugees, have eased emigration for its citizens. Additionally, East Germany has experienced a dramatic exodus of its citizens to West Germany, partly due to the changing political situation in Hungary.

Economic conditions throughout Eastern Europe continue to worsen. As a result, increasing numbers of citizens of these countries continue to leave to seek better lives in the West. However, taken as a whole, much of the Eastern European migration appears

to be movement toward ethnic homelands and thus presents no immediate problem for the United States. For example, large number of Romanians of Hungarian origin have emigrated to Hungary. Similarly, a large number of East Germans have emigrated to West Germany. The hundreds of thousands of ethnic Turks being forced to leave Bulgaria because of ethnic and religious suppression have been entering Turkey. Although Turkey is asking the United States to resettle some of those with relatives in the United States, Bulgarian Turks are mostly resettling in Turkey.

In addition to those who flee to ethnic homelands, thousands of other East Europeans have entered Austria and West Germany seeking resettlement. Although we do not have an estimate of the total number of East Europeans in Austria, as of September 30, 1989, Austria was providing assistance to 13,651 people (5,466 Romanians, 3,094 Czechoslovaks, 1,179 Poles, 559 Yugoslavians, 533 Bulgarians, 400 Hungarians, 15 Albanians, and 2,405 others). These people are housed in camps and hotels around Vienna. Due in part to the large influx of East Europeans, Austria has instituted a "rapid review process" of asylum applications to limit the camp population to those meeting the United Nations' refugee definition. (Austrian refugee status decisions are reviewed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees before they are finalized to ensure the integrity of the adjudication process.) We were told by State Department officials that as a result of the changing political environment in Poland and Hungary, Austria has virtually stopped

granting refugee status to Hungarians and Poles, will soon begin expelling Hungarians and Poles from its refugee camps, and in January 1990 will stop accepting Hungarian asylum applications.

Other East European asylum applicants are in West Germany. State Department officials estimate that 70,000 East Germans are registered with West Germany and perhaps 75,000 more are in the country but not registered. The East German emigrants are provided with West German citizenship, social security and retirement benefits, job training, priority for housing, and subsistence stipends. In addition to resettling East Germans, West Germany is providing assistance to other East Europeans, mostly Poles and Hungarians. West German officials reported that over 260,000 East Europeans (excluding East Germans) arrived in West Germany during the first 9 months of 1989. Most of the 17,034 Poles currently registered for consideration by the United States as refugees are in West Germany. However, changing circumstances in Poland have resulted in West Germany becoming increasingly unwilling to continue to support them. The United States has pledged to move all East Europeans approved for resettlement before July 1, 1989 to the United States by the end of December 1989. There were about 700 such East European refugees in West Germany at the end of September 1989.

CURRENT STATUS OF EAST EUROPEAN  
EMIGRANTS SEEKING U.S. REFUGEE STATUS

During the past five fiscal years, the United States has admitted an average of 8,700 East European refugees per year. The majority have been Poles and Hungarians. As of September 30, 1989, 25,455 East Europeans were registered as refugee applicants with voluntary agencies for interviews with the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) in Europe. Most processing of these applicants takes place in Frankfurt, Vienna, and Rome. In addition, 1,893 applicants have been approved as refugees but have not yet departed for the United States because refugee numbers were unavailable for them in fiscal year 1989. Table 1 shows the countries of origin of these refugee applicants. Most are Poles and Hungarians (79 percent).

Table 1

East European U.S. Refugee Applicants' Countries of Origin

<u>Country of origin</u>	<u>Awaiting INS interview</u>	<u>Approved, awaiting departure</u>
Albania	30	30
Bulgaria	417	69
Czechoslovakia	2,255	88
Poland	17,034	1,080
Romania	2,595	364
Hungary	3,120	262
Yugoslavia	<u>4</u>	<u>0</u>
Total	<u>25,455</u>	<u>1,893</u>

State Department officials informed us that interviews of East Europeans were limited during fiscal year 1989 because of a restricted availability of refugee slots. A total of 6,500 slots were allocated for fiscal year 1989. The majority of those were used for over 5,400 fiscal year 1988 approvals, and existing fiscal year 1989 commitments. In fact, about 8,950 East Europeans entered the United States during fiscal year 1989, using the 6,500 allocation, along with 1,750 slots reallocated from unused Soviet refugee admission slots and 750 semi-funded admission slots. (Apparently, about 50 of the increased admission slots were not used.) According to INS officials, limitations on the number of interviews for Hungarians and Poles continue during fiscal year 1990, while policy options are considered for future processing.

As you are aware, the refugee ceilings for fiscal year 1990 include 6,500 slots for Eastern Europe refugees. As a practical matter, however, it appears that many of these, about 5,000, have already been committed to approved refugees pending admission at the end of fiscal year 1989 and by specific refugee commitments for fiscal year 1990. These commitments include the allocation of refugee numbers to admit (1) immediate relatives of refugees already admitted to the United States (Visa 93), (2) Romanians already approved for refugee admission who will receive the Romanian government's permission to emigrate in fiscal year 1990, and (3) refugees interviewed and approved in Belgrade, Yugoslavia. Thus,

only about 1,500 slots will be available for 25,445 pending East European applications in fiscal year 1990. The 5,000 allocated slots were distributed as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Allocation of Fiscal Year 1990 Eastern European Refugee Numbers

Special use allocation

Fiscal year 1990 Allocation		6,500
Approved pending departure (9/30/89)	1,900	
Visa 93 applicants	1,600	
Romanian third country processing program	1,000	
Belgrade processed refugees	<u>500</u>	
Subtotal:		<u>5,000</u>
Remaining available for fiscal year 1990		<u>1,500</u>

Austria and West Germany have traditionally provided support for Polish and Hungarian refugee applicants awaiting adjudication but have recently moved toward terminating such assistance and are concerned that continued processing by the United States would encourage additional emigration of these groups. The dramatically changing circumstances in Poland and Hungary have moved the United States to reassess its policies for East European refugee applicants. According to State Department and INS officials, various options for processing Poles and Hungarians have been under consideration for several weeks. However, at the time this

testimony was drafted, we were unable to obtain information on the policy changes being contemplated.

This concludes my prepared statement, Mr. Chairman. Thank you again for the opportunity to be of assistance.