

Eastern Europe 1995: a Review of Religious Life in Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland

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In most East European countries 1995 brought no substantial improvement in church–state relations, which continued to be disturbed by a lack of clear mechanisms for drafting and implementing laws, as well as by the readiness of politicians to take advantage of church-related issues. Signs of a widening gap between mostly Roman Catholic and Orthodox countries over the public role of churches were also evident during the year, while ecumenical relations continued to fluctuate under pressure from the Bosnian war and other international developments.

In Poland, the narrow 19 November election defeat of President Lech Wałęsa, a committed Christian, by the 41-year-old Aleksander Kwaśniewski placed former communists in effective control of presidency, government and parliament, and was widely expected to signal a period of church–state confrontation. However, the result was also seen as a serious pastoral failure by Poland’s predominant Roman Catholic Church, whose leader, Cardinal Józef Glemp of Warsaw, had publicly described the contest as one between ‘Christian and neo-pagan values’. In a December communiqué the 112-member Bishops’ Conference expressed anxiety at ‘the assumption of all state power by a single channel of ideas which it is impossible for the faithful to accept’, adding that Polish society had a right to expect the new president to fulfil his ‘many tempting campaign promises’. However, while pledging a readiness to cooperate and improve relations with the Church, Kwaśniewski is expected to remain unbending on key issues, including Poland’s still-unratified 1993 Concordat with the Vatican and the separation of church and state under a future constitution.

Poland was not the only country to witness severe church–state tensions in 1995. In Slovakia, where 1995 church figures put Roman Catholics at 68 per cent of the population of 5.3 million, compared to 7.8 per cent belonging to the Lutheran and Calvinist churches and one per cent to the Orthodox community, worsening church–government disputes culminated in an illegal July police raid on the residence of the Roman Catholic Bishops’ Conference chairman, Bishop Rudolf Baláž, just two weeks after a visit by the Pope. The showdown, widely believed to have been personally orchestrated by premier Vladimír Mečiar, was related to personality clashes, as well as to a political stalemate over issues ranging from privatisation and media independence to minority rights and trade links with Russia. The Roman Catholic Church, which received a ‘solidarity pledge’ from the head of Slovakia’s Ecumenical Council, Lutheran Bishop Julius Filo, accused Mečiar of failing to honour his

autumn 1994 re-election pledges to support its schools and charities, and took the side of conservative President Michal Kováč when the premier attempted to unseat him in May.

The Slovak imbroglio was only the most striking instance of a region-wide tendency for pro- and anti-church positions to be used as identity symbols in the conflict between liberal, westernising groups on the one hand and conservative and nationalist formations on the other.

The consequences of this division were particularly marked in Poland, where Roman Catholic church denunciations were believed to have contributed unwittingly to Kwaśniewski's November election victory. Asked to list a president's 'ideal qualities' in an October survey, only a fifth of Poles said the head of state should be a Roman Catholic. By contrast, three-quarters said a candidate should have political experience and a good education, while 67 per cent cited honesty and 41 per cent business experience. Only one in 20 citizens said backing by the Roman Catholic Church would influence their vote.

The Polish church's lack of a modern, upbeat image appears ironically to have harmed the electoral chances of parties claiming a special church link, while enabling the governing Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej (Democratic Left Alliance (SLD)), which is mostly composed of former communists, to assume the mantle of a modernising, westernising force. A September survey by Poland's CBOS agency confirmed that attitudes to the Roman Catholic Church and the holding of public posts by former communists were the two most important issues separating parties of 'Left' and 'Right'.

In a November interview Cardinal Glemp acknowledged that some Roman Catholic priests 'could have caused completely contrary results' by backing President Wałęsa too emotionally, adding that priests had also committed an 'abuse' by telling their congregations it was a sin to support Kwaśniewski. 'We should admit that we have fewer true Catholics than the statistics show', the cardinal said.

Some are under the influence of a subjective ideology and treat the Church's teachings selectively. Even those Catholics who accept the Church were led in this election by their own vision of contemporary issues. It is a fact that a proportion of baptised people identifying as church members voted for a non-believer and look at the country's affairs differently.

Seven years after the collapse of communism, most of Eastern Europe's churches still await the return of lands and properties seized or confiscated after the Second World War and are therefore unable to achieve economic and financial solvency without relying on state support.

In Hungary, where a 1991 law permits churches to claim a share of 10,000 buildings expropriated in the late 1940s, a church-state commission held its first talks on Roman Catholic property issues in October after long legal delays. However, although Hungary's state secretary for Religious Affairs, István Platthy, announced that 170 properties would be handed back in the near future, barely a third of the 3500 demanded by the Roman Catholic Church have so far been returned.

In the Czech Republic the Roman Catholic Church has tabled claims to 3400 buildings and 350,000 acres of its former Bohemian and Moravian holdings, out of a total of 552,000 acres listed as confiscated in state records. However, a new bill is expected to invalidate restitution demands predating the Czechoslovak Communist Party's 1948 seizure of power. In January 1995 a Czech court attempted to end a

five-year dispute over Prague's gothic St Vitus cathedral by ruling that the landmark, completed only in 1929, was rightfully Roman Catholic church property. But the decision was contested in a petition by 107 parliamentarians in what the Czech primate, Cardinal Miloslav Vlk, condemned as symptomatic of a 'century-old tendency to atheise the Czechs'. In May the Vatican offered to help defuse tensions by taking part in direct negotiations.

Church leaders have argued that economic self-sufficiency is essential to ensure church-state separation, and that failure to return church properties should be matched by compensatory state grants. However, Hungary's Roman Catholic bishops have estimated that an early 1995 freeze in government budget allocations, accompanied by a reduction in tax exemptions and 30 per cent inflation, has effectively cut state subsidies by 40 per cent. Around two-thirds of sums donated to the Roman Catholic Church are spent on repairs and maintenance.

In June the Czech government of Václav Klaus turned down Eastern Europe's first religious tax-covenanting scheme, which would have formed part of a plan to phase out direct state support for churches. However, in November the Czech episcopate's spokesman Fr Miloslav Fiala said state subsidies currently accounted for only a third of the Church's \$35.5 million annual budget. The Klaus government agreed during the same month to donate \$11 million for renovation of the Roman Catholic primate's Prague palace, as well as to raise the salaries which have been paid to priests and ministers of all denominations since the eighteenth century. However, church leaders say their communities will remain effectively deprived of their livelihoods until their assets are restored.

In the Czech case, overall church-state ties are complicated by the absence of a law codifying mutual contacts. A new bill, under preparation since Czechoslovakia's January 1993 division, would have allowed a 'democratic, ideologically neutral state' to engage in 'partner-like cooperation' with churches as 'respected, integral parts of society'. However, in June, the republic's vice-premier, Ivan Kočarník, said the bill had been shelved for failing to make clear whether church and state were to be 'totally or partially separate'.

At the start of 1996 Poland was still the only major East European country without a full postcommunist constitution, leaving church-state relations subject to an outdated 1989 law. The country's 29-article concordat with the Vatican, signed in July 1993 by the government of Hanna Suchocka, would strengthen the Roman Catholic Church's rights by giving them international treaty status. However, the concordat's parliamentary ratification has been blocked by ex-communist and left-wing deputies, who have pointed to imprecisions in several clauses, as well as objecting that the document was finalised without any formal political consultation.

President Kwaśniewski pledged after his election that the concordat's ratification would be the 'most urgent issue' in church-state relations. However, church leaders have consistently rejected suggestions that disputed articles could be renegotiated or reinterpreted, while there has been no movement away from the SLD's earlier position that the treaty cannot be enforced until a constitution has been adopted in a national referendum.

Church and government officials clashed during the year over church tax exemptions, the eligibility of catechists for state salaries and other specific issues. However, disagreement remains deepest over the constitution itself. In April a parliamentary commission chaired by Kwaśniewski approved a compromise formula for the constitution's provision on church-state ties, guaranteeing that the state would not 'take sides' in religious matters, while also stipulating that church and state should respect

each other's 'autonomy and independence'. But in June the Bishops' Conference branded the latest draft 'nihilistic', claiming that it contained 'within itself a coded struggle against everything moral'. The bishops reiterated in a communiqué that they would not accept a constitution which failed to 'defend life from conception', or to uphold 'universal values protecting the fundamental rights of the human person, family and nation'. They added that a reference to God was also needed in the preamble to 'guarantee human dignity'.

Both the Roman Catholic Church and the government of Józef Oleksy – who resigned in January 1996 amid claims that he had spied for Russia – assured Poland's minority churches that they would continue to have the same rights as the majority denomination. However, the Polish Ecumenical Council, grouping the country's seven largest non-Roman Catholic churches, has objected that the concordat and constitution could give Roman Catholics unfair advantages. All seven religious associations currently have full-scale laws regulating their status in Poland. A corresponding bill codifying the rights of the country's 17,000-member Pentecostal church was tabled in the *Sejm* lower house in July 1995.

The lack of clear rules has posed problems in other countries too. Although the Czech and Slovak Republics each have at least 60 Roman Catholic schools, their status remains unclear. In May Slovakia's bishops turned down a government offer to let the church regain ownership of Trnava's seventeenth century University, citing uncertainties over who would foot the bills.

In Romania and Bulgaria, where most citizens traditionally belong to the Orthodox Church, priests have no automatic right to enter hospitals and educational institutions, and can do so only by *ad hoc* arrangement. Although 80 per cent of Bulgarian parents declared a readiness to accept religious education at schools in a 1994 poll, a draft law failed in late 1994 to obtain parliamentary support. In August Bulgarian Orthodox church officials said the government of Zhan Videnov, a former communist, had rejected demands for priests to be allowed to take religious classes after discussions with the Sofia patriarchate, and had offered 'religious knowledge' as a secular substitute. With little demand for religious teachers, the Education Ministry also plans to close Sofia University's theology department.

Similarly, neighbouring Romania's new government-backed education bill fails to provide for confessional schools and will make religious education voluntary for all ages. In September council authorities agreed to return a prominent Bucharest high school after threats of legal action by the city's Roman Catholic archbishop, Ioan Robu; but Robu, who also chairs Romania's joint Roman and Greek Catholic Bishops' Conference, has criticised the government of Nicolae Vacaroiu for failing to restore other schools to the church, of which it had 376 with 53,000 pupils until the communist takeover in 1945.

In October Romania became the first predominantly Orthodox country to allow full-time military chaplains in its armed forces – a provision intended to apply to Catholic, Calvinist and other minority denominations too. But the rights of army pastors have varied elsewhere in the region.

In Bulgaria, where priests and ministers are allowed regularly only into prisons, the Videnov government was reported to have turned down military chaplains outright, in an example of what Orthodox church officials dubbed 'primitive attitudes'. In Slovakia a part-time network was reopened on 1 February, 45 years to the day since chaplains were banned under communist rule, while in the Czech Republic, the army agreed in April to allow 'humanistic officers' to begin training. By contrast, Hungary's Calvinist and Jewish minorities now operate permanent military pastors.

The country's Roman Catholic army bishopric had its Budapest HQ dedicated in November by the dean of the College of Cardinals, Bernard Gantin, at a ceremony attended by church and government leaders.

Poland's Roman Catholic chaplaincy network numbers 230 full-time priests, whose average age of 34 is Europe's youngest. In January 1995 the Defence Ministry protested that a soldiers' prayerbook recently distributed by the country's Roman Catholic field bishop, Sławoj Leszek Głódz, breached freedom of conscience regulations by requiring all regulars and conscripts to participate in Roman Catholic prayers at military ceremonies. However, military bishops from Poland's 560,000-strong Orthodox Church and 90,000-strong Lutheran Church were also installed during the year.

Though subject to harsh economic competition, church-backed press and broadcasting activities have continued to expand. Poland and Hungary now have full-scale Roman Catholic news agencies, while proposals were tabled for closer regional and East-West media cooperation during the year at international church conferences in Graz and Warsaw. Up to 80 per cent of all church-approved Roman Catholic media outlets in Eastern Europe have received funding from the US Catholic Conference. Poland alone boasts around 500 Roman Catholic newspapers and magazines, and 3000 parish magazines, as well as over 50 church-run radio stations and a nationwide TV channel which opened at Niepokolanów monastery, west of Warsaw, in January 1995. The country's minority churches also publish several high-quality, sought-after newspapers, including the Calvinist *Jednota* and Orthodox *Przegląd Prawosławny*.

Meanwhile, the churches are gradually improving their local structures. In Slovakia a Roman Catholic reorganisation in April, two years after the republic gained its own Bishops' Conference, created a second archdiocese at Kosice and made the Roman Catholic primate, Archbishop Ján Sokol, head of a renamed Trnava-Bratislava province. A new Ostrava-based Czech diocese was also announced during the year, while in Bulgaria Bishop Georgi Iovchev of Sofia-Plovdiv was raised from apostolic administrator to full diocesan.

Hungary's churches have pledged to give higher priority to pastoral work and Christian education, while extending their social and charitable involvements and encouraging lay people to ease the work burden on priests. After the November election Poland's Roman Catholic bishops pledged that their Church's 'first pastoral priority' in the new political situation would include reviving an 'atmosphere of love in families', as well as a 'serious educational effort' to meet the spiritual needs and aspirations of young people in schools and parishes. They added that the Church did not 'look indifferently at people's poverty' and wished to help 'especially through charitable activity'. Concrete proposals have included the establishment of special pastoral networks in each diocese for non-believers and non-practising Roman Catholics, a special pastorate for church members active in public life, improved training for priests and seminarians, and a system for adult catechisation. 'Authoritarianism represents a dangerous phenomenon in the church in Poland', the Bishops' Conference secretary-general, Bishop Tadeusz Pieronek, said in January 1996 'The church should understand that power means service. It should not treat people as enemies who rejected the faith and their own Polishness, just because they voted differently than the church advised. It should try to analyse their motives.'

Great challenges still lie ahead. At least 40 per cent of Hungarian Roman Catholic parishes are currently without priests, according to figures cited by episcopate chairman Archbishop István Szeregyi in September. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, over 100 new priests were ordained in the first six months of 1995, a post-

communist record. But with an average age of 65, more Czech priests are dying than being ordained, while the current ratio of one to every 5600 church members compares to one to 1295 in the rest of Europe. Even in the traditional Roman Catholic heartland of Moravia half the Olomouc archdiocese's 716 parishes are currently vacant. In Slovakia, where a new seminary was opened at Nitra in September, the Roman Catholic church's 1900 diocesan and order priests provide a nationwide ratio of one to 2789, well below that of Poland.

Even in Poland figures released during 1995 confirmed that vocations to the priesthood had fallen by around one third since the peak years of 1985–87 while admissions to female orders had fallen by at least 35 per cent. Concern has also risen over a marked increase in thefts and robberies from churches and presbyteries in the country's 9500 Roman Catholic parishes, as well as a recent spate of cemetery and shrine desecrations.

In the Czech Republic, some Roman Catholics hope the shortage of pastors can be solved through an expansion of the Church's permanent diaconate, as well as by recognising priests ordained without authorisation under communist rule. However, only 50 of an estimated 250 'underground priests' have so far had their status confirmed under February 1992 Vatican guidelines and many are reported to be bitter about the Church's reluctance to recognise their ministries.

In March 1996 the Czech Church announced the creation of a Greek Catholic exarchate – equivalent to an apostolic administration in the Roman Catholic Church – to incorporate an estimated 25 married priests and 20,000 lay people currently linked to Slovakia's Greek Catholic Prešov diocese. However, church leaders continued to resist suggestions that canonical rules could be relaxed to allow other former underground pastors to serve as regular priests. The claim that 10 per cent of all Roman Catholic clergy acted as informers in communist times, reported by the weekly *Respekt* at the start of the year, has also contributed to the fall in clergy numbers.

On the face of it, there are sound reasons why closer ecumenical contacts should be seen as an imperative by churches in Eastern Europe.

Evidence suggests the larger churches are trusted and respected by society: a summer opinion survey placed Slovakia's Roman Catholic Church second to the national army with 50 per cent approval, but far ahead of government, presidency, parliament and other institutions. Yet religious affiliations vary widely and are particularly weak among younger, less educated citizens. Fewer than 10 per cent of Bulgarian children are currently believed to be baptised – a figure comparable to the former East Germany. Although religious education is available in Czech state schools, only one to two per cent of pupils receive it.

Up to three-quarters of the Czech Republic's 10.9 million inhabitants watched parts of the pope's two-day May visit on TV, while more than half believed it was 'significant' for their country, according a survey by the Czech Institute for Public Opinion Research. But although 40 per cent claimed to be Roman Catholics in a 1993 Culture Ministry census, compared to around 5 per cent belonging to the largest Protestant and Orthodox Churches put together, the figure was revised downwards to 20 per cent by Cardinal Miloslav Vlk of Prague in June. Only 12 per cent of Czech Roman Catholics practise their faith nationwide, with church attendance ranging from 15 per cent in Olomouc to below one per cent in the western Plzeň diocese. Just 10 per cent of Czech marriages are celebrated in church, and half end in divorce within a year.

In Poland, where fewer than one third of Roman Catholics currently attend church weekly, compared to 37.8 per cent recorded in 1991, masses and meetings were well

attended during the pope's one-day visit to the southern Bielsko-Żywiec diocese in May. However, in a rare case of open criticism, several lay commentators challenged John Paul II's remarks during a keynote sermon at Skoczów that his homeland was currently witnessing the 'programmed laicisation of society' and attempts to drive believers 'to the margins of social life'.

In one indication of moral and social attitudes, abortion rates remain relatively high in most of the region and were the object of a special autumn appeal by the Slovak bishops. In Romania, where abortion was prohibited under communist rule in order to achieve demographic targets and could even incur the death penalty, sudden liberalisation in 1990 gave the country by far the highest abortion rate in Europe, with over 1.2 million conducted yearly in a population of 24 million. A total of 110,000 abortions – seven for every live birth – were registered in Bucharest alone in 1994. Lacking medicines and vitamins, Romania also has Europe's highest infant mortality rate, while overcrowding at orphanages was reported in February 1995 to have returned to 1989 levels.

Poland's January 1993 'Law on Family Planning, Defence of the Family and Acceptance of Pregnancy Terminations' makes the country an exception, since it permits abortions only when a woman's 'life or health' are endangered, as well as in cases of rape and incest or 'very serious and irreparable' foetal damage. In a December 1995 report the Polish Health Ministry said it had registered 782 abortions nationwide in 1994, compared to 135,000 in 1985 and 11,640 in 1992. However, opponents of the law claim that these official figures are fictional, and that up to 50,000 abortions are still conducted illegally each year at high prices at gynaecology clinics. A bill to liberalise the law by allowing abortions for women facing 'difficult living conditions', drafted by left-wing deputies, received its first reading in the Polish parliament in March 1996. Pro-life campaigners say most abortions occur in relatively well-off households, making the problem a moral rather than social one, and have vowed to resist the new legislation.

Throughout Eastern Europe religious sects and cults, some with apocalyptic pretensions, continue to exploit the weakness of mainstream denominations. In Bulgaria, where the government has been accused of violating religious rights in its effort to combat sects, parents' groups accused alternative religions in August of running spy and criminal rings, and demanded 'decisive state action'. In Romania a breakaway 'New Jerusalem' group barracked Orthodox cathedral services at Pucioasa, while in the Czech Republic and Poland church-backed information networks were formed to counter the spread of sects. Under Poland's highly permissive 1989 law, 140 religious associations, including 11 Buddhist and six Hindu sects, currently enjoy full privileges as registered churches, including the right to teach at state schools, own property and claim tax exemptions. Besides the Roman Catholic Church, 68 Christian groups and denominations are also officially recognised, while 20 others are seeking similar rights. By way of comparison, only five religious associations are recognised in Italy, owing to much stricter registration requirements.

Minority tensions are another area in which interchurch ties could prove important. In the Czech Republic the Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren have continued to lead the way in the search for reconciliation with relatives of the 3.5 million Sudeten Germans deported after the Second World War, helped by a joint declaration by the Czech and German Bishops' Conferences for the anniversary of the 1945 VE-Day and an exchange of declarations between Czech and German Evangelical leaders.

Elsewhere, however, the churches' minority rights record has been mixed. Ethnic

Hungarians in Slovakia and Romania have complained of a lack of action by majority denominations. A special November appeal by Hungary's Archbishop Szeregely on behalf of Slovakia's 10 per cent ethnic Hungarian minority, which faced cultural restrictions under a new language law, brought a guarded response in February 1996 from the Slovak Church. Romania's new education law also threatens to restrict the rights of the 1.6 million-strong Hungarian minority, whose religious leaders have appealed to the Orthodox and Greek Catholic Churches for support. Four Romanian Roman Catholic bishops asked Hungary's premier, Gyula Horn, during a March meeting in Budapest to ensure that the return of church properties was included in a treaty between the two countries.

Romania's Orthodox Church, which nominally comprises 87 per cent of the 22.8 million-strong population and is the world's second largest after that of Russia, set up a joint commission with the previously outlawed Greek Catholic minority in the autumn after the first top-level talks were arranged in the Bucharest parliament in June. Both churches are working on proposals for joint prayers, Marian celebrations and catechetical-missionary links. Meanwhile, having regained 356 parishes and around 150 churches out of an estimated pre-war total of 2000, as well as dozens of land holdings, Greek Catholics are reported to have retracted earlier demands for the restitution of all communist-seized properties as a precondition for dialogue. Attending Bucharest talks with President Ion Iliescu in October, a senior Vatican official, Cardinal Edward Cassidy, said he believed conditions for a visit by the pope were now 'significantly better' in Romania. A long-standing official invitation was renewed when Iliescu paid his third visit to the Vatican in March.

The Romanian case is an exception, however. In neighbouring Bulgaria, leaders of the Orthodox Church, which has been divided between two rival synods since 1992, vigorously criticised President Zhelyu Zhelev for issuing a second invitation to the pope during his 10 December Vatican visit, on the grounds that a papal visit would 'contradict traditional Orthodox attitudes' and 'unduly activate' the Catholic minority, which represents one per cent of the country's population of nine million.

Roman Catholic-Orthodox relations in Eastern Europe reflect wider ecumenical uncertainties, which were debated during two Orthodox gatherings at Patmos in September and Bucharest in October – the latter marking the 110th anniversary of the Romanian Church's autocephaly. After the pope met the ecumenical patriarch in the summer, there were rumours that he might meet Russia's Orthodox patriarch, Aleksii II, in June 1996 when he travelled to Hungary for the millennium of the Benedictine monastery of Pannonhalma. But in January the plan was abandoned in the face of Orthodox opposition.

Roman Catholic-Protestant relations have also achieved a mixed record in Eastern Europe. In Hungary a 16-member joint commission, comprising Latin and Greek Catholics as well as Lutherans, Calvinists, Methodists, Baptists and Orthodox, is currently working on social, moral, theological and religious rights issues, while closer Christian-Jewish relations have also been pledged after a joint ecumenical declaration in March regretting the part played by Hungarian Christians in the Holocaust.

In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, however, interchurch ties were disrupted by disputes in the run-up to the pope's early summer pilgrimages over the planned canonisation of Jan Sarkander (1576-1620) and three other early modern saints. In the Czech Republic particularly the Sarkander controversy revealed deep historical and spiritual divisions between Catholics and Protestants, which were not fully resolved by the pope's plea at Olomouc for Protestant forgiveness for the 'harmful

acts' committed against them by Catholics.

The canonisation of Sarkander, whom many Protestants regard as a symbol of the forced recatholicisation of the Czechs during the seventeenth century Thirty Years War, was followed by Roman Catholic gestures, including the first ever participation by a Catholic primate, Cardinal Vlk, in July at a commemoration service for the Bohemian martyr Jan Hus (1369–1415). Meanwhile, during his Slovak pilgrimage, the pope also acknowledged Protestant sufferings, and unexpectedly stopped to pray at a Prešov memorial to Lutheran victims of a Roman Catholic-led military campaign in 1687. But many Protestants believe the canonisations were provocative acts which have deepened rather than alleviated longstanding divisions.

At an October Warsaw meeting of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) demands were put forward for the harmonisation of legislation on religious rights, as well as for steps to ensure standard procedures in the vital area of implementation. It was also claimed that religious rights violations are no longer an East–West issue, but are being reported in European Union member-states such as Greece and Germany, in many cases reflecting the differing traditions of predominantly Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant countries.

Within Eastern Europe, church–state relations show no marked differences between countries currently governed by parties composed of former communists, such as Hungary or Bulgaria, and those with liberal administrations, such as the Czech Republic. In each case the fate of local churches depends on a complex interplay of domestic factors, in which historical attributes, political cultures and public attitudes will continue to play the key role.