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Eastern Europe 1996: a Review of Religious Life in Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland

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The main lines of discord in church–state relations in Eastern Europe since the collapse of communism continued throughout 1996, as rival attempts were made by church and state to tackle key issues. Liberal or conservative election victories in Lithuania, Bulgaria and Romania over incumbent former communists were widely seen as signalling a possible region-wide shift in the public mood. However, the consequences for church life are uncertain. Although differing over economic and constitutional issues, ex-communist rulers have generally shown an unsympathetic but legally correct attitude towards religious questions; but church relations with liberal and nationalist governments in the Czech Republic and Slovakia have also been severely troubled. As before, the fate of religious communities will depend on a complex interplay of domestic pressures and strains, which are unlikely to be affected substantially by changes of government.

Ecumenical Relations

In the run-up to the June 1997 Second European Ecumenical Assembly in Graz, interconfessional relations assumed a higher profile during the year. With Eastern Europe's four predominantly Roman Catholic countries – Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic – widely assumed to be front-runners for NATO and European Union membership when a promised announcement is made in 1997, fears were expressed during the year of a possible new *de facto* division between a more advanced Catholic and Protestant West and a poorer, less stable and largely Orthodox East. After the bloody break-up of Yugoslavia, some analysts believe dangers may exist where this border runs internally, such as in Belarus' and Ukraine, and perhaps Romania and Poland. Hence the pressing need for Catholic and Orthodox church leaders to foster tolerance and coexistence.

The world's Orthodox population, estimated at 200 million, is currently growing thanks to a church revival in postcommunist countries and increased diaspora conversions. However, little if any progress in interchurch relations occurred in 1996.

The Russian Orthodox patriarch, Aleksii II, turned down a meeting with the pope at the Benedictine monastery at Pannonhalma during John Paul II's second visit to Hungary (7–9 September) after allegedly failing to obtain consent from his synod

and Orthodox leaders abroad. Orthodox representatives from Russia, Romania, Bulgaria and Georgia, as well as from the Ecumenical and Coptic patriarchs, later attended a 'Day of Christian Unity' at Pannonhalma, whose foundation predates the 1056 Great Schism. However, plans for the unprecedented pope–patriarch encounter were dismissed as 'hypocritical' by a Bulgarian Orthodox spokesman, Marin Zarbanov, who accused Roman Catholic organisers of attempting to 'avoid proper procedures and disguise differences' while 'avoiding real acts of mutual recognition'. During a May visit to neighbouring Slovakia, Patriarch Aleksii urged the local Orthodox minority to strengthen ties with Russian Orthodoxy.

Orthodox attitudes relate to internal conditions in the case of Bulgaria, which is the fifth country after Russia, Ukraine, Estonia and rump Yugoslavia to suffer a major Orthodox church division. The four-year rift in the Bulgarian church, which nominally comprises 87 per cent of the country's population of nine million, reached a head on 4 July when the governing synod announced the imminent excommunication of a self-proclaimed alternative patriarch, Pimen of Nevrokop. Pimen's followers, who have named rival bishops for all 12 Bulgarian Orthodox sees, accuse the church's 25-year head, Patriarch Maksim, of collaborating with the former communist regime.

Although John Paul II holds invitations from the state and from the Catholic Church, Bulgarian Orthodox leaders are opposed to a papal visit against such a background. A September television interview remark by Patriarch Maksim calling on the pope to 'return to the bosom of Orthodoxy' was dismissed as a 'joke' by other church officials. However, Maksim has confirmed he does not share the pope's 'vision of a return to unity among Christian churches' and would not wish to meet him.

Other national Orthodox churches have also pointed to the need for greater mutual recognition before ecumenical ties can improve, as well as for progress on vexed issues such as proselytism and the future of Greek Catholic communities in Ukraine, Romania and elsewhere, who marked the fourth centenary of the creation of Eastern-rite Catholicism at the 1596 Union of Brest during the year. The Lutheran secretary-general of the Geneva-based World Council of Churches, Konrad Raiser, who visited Poland in April, has warned that ecumenical ties – including a hoped-for Millennium meeting of Christian leaders – will be impeded by the Roman Catholic Church's 'current definition' of papal primacy, which appeared 'to give the universal church ontological and temporal priority' over local churches, and to call in question the 'churchness' of non-Catholic denominations. An angry pastoral letter from Poland's eastern Roman Catholic BiałyŹystok archdiocese in April, attacking 'Orthodox chauvinists and Russian nationalists', lent weight to the claim. At issue was the region's fifteenth-century Supraśl monastery, one of Eastern Europe's oldest, which was restored to Poland's 570,000-strong autocephalous Orthodox Church by a government ruling in February after a long interchurch dispute.

Troubled top-level relations between Eastern Europe's largest churches have had knock-on effects on general religious freedoms.

In mid-1996, Poland was home to 68 registered Christian denominations and 56 non-Christian faiths. The requirement of just 15 signatures for registration of a religious association was raised to 100 in the summer. The Adventists became the latest of thirteen churches to be fully recognised under separate laws. Meanwhile the Roman Catholic Church joined the country's ten largest minority denominations in preparing an ecumenical Bible, which will be postcommunist Europe's fourth after editions in Slovenia, Slovakia and the Czech Republic when completed at the end of

the century. However, the Polish Ecumenical Council (PRE) has warned that a wider change in clergy attitudes is needed to create a public 'ecumenical consciousness', and has accused the Bishops' Conference of ignoring expert findings on such issues as the mutual recognition of baptisms. Minority church leaders have charged the Catholic Church in Poland with 'rigorously interpreting' the decree of the Second Vatican Council on ecumenism, *Redintegratio unitatis*, and of using their own past subservience to the communist regime as a pretext for avoiding links. As with Catholic-Jewish relations, a flourishing dialogue can be observed among specialist groups, but this has no noticeable feedback on social attitudes as a whole.

Bulgaria's Catholic minority, whose three dioceses comprise just one per cent of the population, claims to have encountered a 'respectful attitude' from the country's government, led by former communists. However, Catholic plans to install a cross on the site of a former Soviet army memorial outside the partly Catholic city of Plovdiv had to be scrapped in summer 1996 after Orthodox complaints.

In Romania, government sources rejected rumours that Orthodoxy could be declared the 'state church' under a new law, but admitted there had been no 'comprehensive solution' to problems facing the country's 17 recognised minority faiths. A postcommunist 'law on cults' has been delayed by persistent revisions since first being drafted in 1993.

Although religious freedom is now constitutionally guaranteed in all post-communist countries, subject only to national security and public order requirements, implementation problems remain widespread. A 'Human Dimension Seminar' of the 54-country Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, held in Warsaw in April, stressed that a 'long-term process' was needed to bring individual country practices into line with agreed overall standards. Key recommendations included further intergovernmental meetings on tolerance, proselytism and conscientious objection, a comparative study of religious laws in OSCE member-states, and an international experts' commission to advise governments on confessional issues.

Interethnic and Minority Issues

Legal uncertainties have not, however, prevented interchurch cooperation on practical issues.

Leaders of all Christian churches have cooperated in defending the rights of Hungarian minorities in Eastern Europe. In a letter of December 1995 Hungary's Catholic Bishops' Conference chairman, Archbishop István Seregély of Eger, appealed to Slovak church leaders to help protect the civil and cultural rights of Slovakia's 567,000 ethnic Hungarians under a restrictive new language law. The Slovak bishops responded in February 1996, demanding that the Mečiar government provide gestures of reassurance. However, they played down the threat and insisted minority rights were adequately protected.

A total of 3.5 million ethnic Hungarians have lived in neighbouring countries since Hungary lost a third of its territory under the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, including at least 1.62 million in Romania, 450,000 in Serbia and smaller groups in Ukraine, Austria and Croatia. Minority attempts to rebuild links with Hungary since the 1989 collapse of communist rule have caused tension with local authorities, who fear Budapest still harbours claims to areas it once controlled.

Hungarian-speakers of various denominations, including Catholics, Evangelicals and Baptists, endorsed calls for minority guarantees during the third World Conference of Reformed Hungarians in August in Transylvania, which was attended by

15,000 Hungarian Calvinists from 40 countries.

In Romania itself, there are signs of progress towards overcoming a 50-year feud between previously outlawed Greek Catholics and the predominant Orthodox Church, which is the second largest after Russia's and nominally makes up 85 per cent of the 22.8 million-strong population. In statements during 1996, Metropolitan Nicolae Corneanu of Banat defended Greek Catholic rights and urged steps to resolve jurisdictional and property disputes. The Vatican's Bucharest nuncio, Archbishop Janusz Bolonek, denied press claims in March that Orthodox leaders had voiced 'total opposition' to a papal visit to Romania. Cardinal Achille Silvestrini, prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Eastern Churches, said he found the Greek Catholic Church's situation had 'much changed for the better' after visiting Romania in June.

In May, the Orthodox archdiocese of Cluj published a book documenting the cases of 1700 communist-era prisoners of conscience. Although most entries were devoted to the Orthodox clergy – half of whose 10,000 members served prison and camp terms – up to 300 Catholics, Calvinists and Lutherans were also included. A coauthor, Ștefan Iloaie, said it was hoped the book would help all churches obtain fuller rights.

Romanian Christians of all confessions have defended the rights of Romanian-speakers in the neighbouring former Soviet republic of Moldova, where a grenade attack took place in September on the residence of Orthodox Metropolitan Petru Păduraru, whose breakaway Metropolitan Church of Bessarabia has been refused legal status after attempting to reunite with the Bucharest patriarchate.

In Albania, some citizens still contest the nomination by the ecumenical patriarch in 1992 of the Greek, Anastasios Yanulatos, to head the country's autocephalous Orthodox Church. However, a government official, Lekë Tasi, said in May that the controversial archbishop was helping Albania's integration with Europe as well as underlining the country's importance as a united, multifaith society after the ethnic division of Bosnia. He added that disputes over Anastasios' appointment, which was approved by Albania's Orthodox council, reflected an attempt to weaken the Orthodox Church, and said President Sali Berisha's time-limit to the archbishop's stay should be seen as 'theoretical' only.

Efforts by the Czech Republic's Roman Catholic and Evangelical Churches to resolve disputes over the rights of up to 3.5 million former Sudeten Germans expelled from Czechoslovakia in 1945 were praised by President Václav Havel in March. A Czech-German declaration, signed by Czech and German leaders on 21 January 1997, was welcomed by churches in both countries.

Among other initiatives, Cardinal Vlk of Prague was praised by Czech Protestants for becoming the first Roman Catholic leader to attend an ecumenical ceremony at the Husinec birthplace of martyred reformer Jan Hus (1369–1415) in July. Two Czech interchurch commissions are currently studying the Hus case and atrocities committed by both sides during the seventeenth-century forced 'recatholicisation' of Bohemia and Moravia.

All mainstream churches share a common interest in countering sects and new religious movements which have proliferated throughout Eastern Europe since the last years of communism. In most countries, larger confessions have set up advisory offices and issued publications for those needing information and advice, while there have been calls for registration rules to be tightened, as in Poland, to restrict the number of legally empowered religious groups.

In Hungary, where 62 religious associations currently enjoy full church privileges,

including property ownership, tax exemptions and the right to teach in state schools, Catholic, Protestant and Jewish leaders joined in protesting against a new media law in early 1996, which would give broadcasting rights to small groups equal to those of the country's historic confessions.

Bulgarian Orthodox leaders have accused new religious groups of infiltrating established Protestant denominations, while the Romanian government blocked a Bucharest rally by Jehovah's Witnesses in July after Orthodox and Catholic protests that they subverted 'true Christian teaching'. An office of the Aum Shinrikyo sect, responsible for poison gas attacks in Japan, was closed at Durau in April.

Social and Moral Issues

All churches have also taken a stand on social and moral issues, especially in Poland, where a bill to liberalise abortion, tabled a month after the November 1995 election of President Aleksander Kwaśniewski, a former communist, brought church-government relations to their worst since the 1989 collapse of communism.

Health Ministry statistics suggested that Poland's 1993 law, allowing abortions only when a mother's life or health were threatened, or in cases of rape, incest and irreparable foetal damage, had reduced annual abortions from 11,000 in 1992 to 559 in 1995. However, the law's opponents claimed that up to 50,000 per year were still performed illegally in Poland and abroad. They also pointed out that the legislation failed to halt a 30 per cent decline in live births since 1985 which has made the growth rate of Poland's population – currently 38.6 million – the lowest for half a century. An earlier liberalising law was vetoed by President Lech Wałęsa in July 1994. However, President Kwaśniewski had pledged to sign new legislation as part of his campaign.

The liberalising bill, allowing abortions for women facing 'burdensome living conditions or a difficult personal situation', was passed in the Sejm on 30 August by 208 votes to 61, with 15 abstentions, after an unsuccessful walkout by opposition deputies. Church leaders vigorously condemned the move, warning that unrepentant perpetrators of abortions faced automatic excommunication. A 52–40 vote in the 100-seat Senate upper house to reject the new bill on 3 October was followed by a Bishops' Conference letter to parliamentarians, as well as an impassioned appeal by the pope warning that 'a nation which kills its own children has no future'. However, on 24 October the Sejm voted narrowly to reject the Senate veto. Despite last-minute pleas by pro-life politicians, President Kwaśniewski signed the bill into law on 20 November.

The head of the Polish church's Family Commission, Fr Kazimierz Kurek, has said he believes a 'great pastoral programme' is now needed to dissuade women from acting on their rights. The Bishops' Conference has also warned that the new law is not 'binding in conscience' and has promised to 'ensure conditions which will enable every woman who is abandoned or experiencing moral dilemmas with maternity to give birth and bring up her child' under a new Fund for the Defence of Life.

Meanwhile, the campaign against the liberalisation has also shown the church's capacity for mass protests. At least 15,000 demonstrated in Warsaw on the day of the Senate vote, and 50,000 on 24 October, while a pro-life Solidarity senator, Alicja Grzeškowiak, said she had received three million letters. However, some Catholics have criticised church leaders for failing to stress other sections of the 1993 law, which also required government bodies to provide 'all necessary material, legal and medical help' for pregnant women and single mothers.

Romania has by far the highest abortion levels in Europe, with 1.2 million recorded annually, three times the number of live births, accompanied by a declining number of marriages and a rising divorce rate. The Orthodox Church vigorously supported a ban on homosexuality, reimposed under September amendments to the legal code, although this was later modified under European Parliament pressure to cover only acts carried out publicly. A delegation from the Conference of European Churches praised Orthodox cooperation with Romania's Lutheran and Calvinist Churches in a programme to provide medical care for homeless street children. At least 100,000 under-18s are still in full-time care, while orphanage overcrowding was reported to have returned to 1989 levels during the year. The official government figure of 8000 homeless children nationwide was described as a 'gross underestimation' by volunteers from the Orthodox Church, which has 65 full-time orphanage chaplains.

In Bulgaria, a government offer in January of free contraception to unemployed and low-paid women and Gypsies has not prevented a rapid increase in abortion rates and a fall in the population level. The sociological agency ASSA said 120,000 abortions were legally registered in the first five months of 1996, compared to 60,000 live births.

Faced with a falling birthrate and rampant abortions, Slovakia's Mečiar government raised family supplements in August after demands by the Catholic Bishops' Conference for a 'consistent pro-family policy'. Although abortions officially fell from 107,130 in 1990 to 48,000 in 1995 in the neighbouring Czech Republic, the number still narrowly outstrips live births. All churches vowed to resist pre-election calls by members of the ruling ODS for the legalisation of euthanasia, while Roman Catholic leaders have also criticised the government's failure to promote social and moral values, and are backing planned curbs on the country's rapidly-growing prostitution industry.

In a 72-page pastoral letter in August, Hungary's Roman Catholic bishops described a sudden surge in abortions to 75,000 annually and a 23 per cent drop in the real value of pensions over five years as 'evil consequences' of current government policies. All mainstream churches spoke out during the year against planned legislation granting homosexual partnerships equal rights with married couples. With 107,000 live births in 1996, compared to 145,000 deaths, and a falling life expectancy of 64.8 years, the same as a century ago, Hungary's ageing population has dropped by four per cent since 1977 and is expected to fall a further 10 per cent in the next 20 years. In a survey, 20 per cent of aborting mothers said they had as many as two abortions yearly, while 21 per cent of children were born out of wedlock in 1996, compared to 10 per cent a decade ago.

Despite the need for national agreement on key issues like these, church-government disputes have dragged on in all countries, sometimes assuming spectacular proportions.

Dispute over the Status of the Catholic Church in Poland

In Poland, a church-parliament commission was set up after President Kwaśniewski's first meeting with Cardinal Józef Glemp of Warsaw in March to study the future of Poland's concordat with the Holy See of 28 July 1993, which would give international treaty status to church rights if approved by the Sejm. However, relations deteriorated in May when a Vatican letter to foreign minister Dariusz Rosati was leaked to the press suggesting that Rome had agreed that a unilateral Polish

declaration could be appended to the concordat. On 9 June the president said he believed the 29-article concordat would be ratified before the pope's seventh visit to Poland in May–June 1997, but leaders of the governing Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) continued to insist that various provisions should be renegotiated. On 3 July the 460-seat Sejm voted 199 to 170, with 11 abstentions, to postpone ratification until after the adoption of a Polish constitution. Cardinal Glemp called the latest setback 'a classic case of the principle *cuius regio eius religio*', and accused ex-communist parliamentarians of 'giving priority to the narrowly defined interests of a party assumed hostile to the church'. Responding to the statement, the SLD's parliamentary leader, Jerzy Szmajdziński, accused the church of 'political agitation' and said its hostility testified to its 'great trouble with a democratic Poland'. In a 4 July survey by Poland's CBOS agency, 57 per cent of citizens said the concordat should be ratified, although only 10 per cent thought this should come before a constitution, compared to 44 per cent who thought a constitution should come first and 46 per cent who were undecided or believed it would make no difference. In July Rosati told Poland's church-run Catholic Information Agency (KAI) that the pope was 'disgusted' at the 'political games' over the concordat, and warned that the Vatican's withdrawal from further talks would be disastrous for Poland's international image. A rare statement by the Vatican's Warsaw nunciature in July recalled that the concordat had been the 'fruit of long years' work', and said it was a 'worrying phenomenon' that it had now become the object of 'electoral declarations based on false interpretations'. Addressing the Sejm on 6 December, Rosati said talks with the Vatican on a formula to break the impasse were still continuing. However, he confirmed that Rome had rejected renegotiation or the addition of a joint protocol, making a unilateral declaration setting out Poland's reservations and interpretations the only possible solution.

Without far-reaching changes in the composition of parliament, the concordat is unlikely to be ratified, particularly while the precondition remains prior acceptance of a new national constitution. Poland is currently the only main East European country without a postcommunist constitution. However, several hundred amendments have been tabled to the latest draft, making passage difficult to imagine before elections in September 1997. In May, the Bishops' Conference rejected the draft, claiming it endorsed 'moral relativism' and would establish a 'secular, atheist state'. In a pastoral letter in September the bishops reiterated earlier demands for an '*Invocatio Dei*', or reference to God, in the preamble to ensure absolute values, as well as clauses enshrining the right to life from conception, the priority of marriages over 'free unions' and parental control over the 'content and direction' of education. An SLD-led parliamentary commission voted on 11 December to accept one of nine preamble formulae, tabled by ex-premier Tadeusz Mazowiecki, recognising the twin status of religious and humanitarian values. Church representatives voiced doubts, however, as to whether this would be deemed acceptable by the bishops.

Church–Government Relations in Other Countries

Church–government animosities flared in neighbouring countries too.

In the Czech Republic Cardinal Miloslav Vlk of Prague charged in a May interview that the country's liberal-led government could be 'compared to some extent' to the former communist regime in its anti-Catholic prejudices and said many Czech politicians still had to 'liberate themselves' from antichurch stereotypes.

In Hungary, where church incomes have been sharply reduced since a 1995 freeze

in budget allocations by the socialist-led government of Gyula Horn, a Bishops' Conference spokesman, Fr László Lukács, confirmed that a 'very serious deterioration' in church–government relations had continued in 1996.

Meanwhile, the pope's April appointment of a new Vatican nuncio to Belarus caused angry government reactions in Slovakia. The 69-year-old Bratislava-Trnava auxiliary, Dominik Hrusovský, had been the only Bishops' Conference member refusing to sign an April protest against amendments to Slovakia's penal code, restricting antigovernment demonstrations. By sending him abroad, the Slovak press speculated, the Vatican had strengthened backing for premier Mečiar's key opponent, President Michal Kovac. In October, Mečiar's Democratic Slovakia Movement (HZDS) demanded the publication of a papal letter allegedly urging the Catholic Church to cooperate more readily with the government.

In Bulgaria, where the government of Zhan Videnov was accused by President Zhelyu Zhelev in Spring 1996 of holding secret talks with Russia on the country's 'reincorporation', relations between the government and the Orthodox Church plummeted to a new low in April when a Sofia prosecutor threatened to arrest Patriarch Maksim in connection with alleged business irregularities. A six-week visit (May–July) by the exiled King Simeon II, his first for 50 years, was boycotted by government ministers but warmly supported by church leaders, although Orthodox spokesmen denied that the church favoured the restoration of a Bulgarian monarchy.

Orthodox church leaders warned candidates in Romania's 1996 elections not to commit 'blasphemy' by invoking God's name in their campaigns. In October they accused former communists of attempting to discredit the conservative opposition by circulating a letter with the signatures of two leading metropolitans demanding the dismissal of the 'compromised' Patriarch Teoctist and other synod members.

Disputes Over Property

Property issues have been one area where particular disputes have proved most frequent.

After losing its majority in elections on 1 June the Czech Republic's liberal-led coalition government, led by premier Václav Klaus's Civic Democratic Party (ODS), won narrow parliamentary acceptance for a clause in its programme allowing restitution of 170,000 hectares of forest land owned by the Catholic Church before the 1948 imposition of communist rule, accompanied by the phasing out of annual state grants by the year 2001. Under Christian Democrat pressure, it also promised in September to return communist-seized church properties now in state hands if no 'important public interests' are affected. Both moves are vigorously opposed, however. Opposition Social Democrats, Communists and extreme-right Republicans forced through a motion in October ordering a halt to church restitutions. Although this is not binding on the government, a church spokesman accused Klaus of offering 'small concessions' out of political necessity rather than any concern for principles. The Catholic Church is seeking the return of 225,000 land and lake hectares out of 552,000 listed as confiscated in state records, as well as 3380 buildings. In an October poll by the *Denni Telegraf* daily, 48 per cent of Czech citizens favoured the complete or partial return of church assets, compared to 39 per cent who were against the move and 13 per cent undecided. Church leaders indicated that they could abandon earlier claims to Prague's St Vitus cathedral, which was originally commissioned by the German emperor as a civic building, after a court ruling on 14 November confirmed Catholic ownership of two nearby churches.

Romania's Greek Catholic Church, which has campaigned for the return of its seized properties since regaining legal status in 1990, was said by government officials in March to have repossessed 135 places of worship, with a further 12 shared with Orthodox parishes and 46 under construction. Its 356 parishes had also regained over 80 land holdings by early 1996, while most of its 968 priests receive state pensions. But Romania's mostly Hungarian-speaking Calvinist and Evangelical Churches say their own communist-confiscated assets are still being withheld. At least 14 interchurch representations have been submitted to the government without success since 1990.

In Hungary itself, where 66.2 per cent of the 10.7 million-strong population claimed to be Roman Catholics in a 1993 census, compared to 21.9 per cent belonging to other denominations, the promised restitution of 3500 Catholic properties has been subject to a three-year standstill. Over 60 per cent of government budget allocations to the Catholic Church have been spent on repairs and maintenance, substantially reducing clerical incomes.

Elsewhere, the record has been mixed. In Poland the SLD proposed a bill in early summer to limit the restitution of communist-seized Catholic properties, while in October an SLD deputy proposed a 'church tax' system modelled on those of Germany and Austria. The latter measure, believed likely to reduce declared membership of the Catholic Church to a third of the population from the present 95 per cent, was opposed by two-thirds of Poles in a July survey by the Social Research Workshop, although 82 per cent said the church should be more open about its finances.

In Bulgaria, Orthodox church leaders complained of a lack of funds to repair Sofia's landmark St Alexander Nevsky cathedral. However, the first new Catholic church for half a century was consecrated in Plovdiv on 2 June. In Albania, an early 1996 announcement that the government was to take possession of 21 mostly Orthodox monasteries and religious centres as national monuments was revoked in March after combined church protests.

Leaders of all main Christian churches in the Czech Republic have backed the return of properties to the small surviving Jewish community. One third of the 202 buildings promised by the Klaus government had been returned to the Czech Federation of Jewish Councils by the end of 1996.

A law allowing the return of Jewish assets and compensation for an estimated 20,000 Holocaust survivors was passed by Hungary's parliament in October, a month after Europe's largest synagogue reopened in Budapest after five years' restoration work. The New York-based World Jewish Congress has demanded similar steps from other East European countries.

Education Issues

Another area of regional conflict has been education. A petition for the return of school religion in Romania, launched in May, attracted a million signatures by October, while the country's Orthodox Church has also demanded the reopening of theology departments at universities.

In March Cardinal Jan Korec of Nitra warned that educational disputes were causing Slovakia's Roman Catholic Church 'severe problems' with the government of Vladimír Mečiar. He added that church leaders had welcomed past government pledges to pay salaries to state school catechists and make up shortages in trained religious teachers. They would not accept current Education Ministry

plans to double the size of religious classes, the cardinal added, and were also demanding a reduction in the 'excessive' state taxation rates required from Catholic schools.

In the same month Hungary's Roman Catholic bishops appealed for public donations to the country's 200 Catholic schools, warning that some, with a combined total of over 37,000 pupils, could face closure after the withdrawal of government subsidies. In a pastoral letter in June they described the church's schools and Pilicsaba University as 'victims of discrimination'.

In Poland, the government finally agreed in June to church demands that the 20,000 priests, monks and nuns currently teaching the catechism in state schools should be paid regular salaries from the 1997–98 school year, at an estimated annual budget cost of \$58 million. Education remained an area of controversy here too. In the spring Poland's education minister, Jerzy Wiatr, a former Marxism–Leninism lecturer, questioned the right of parents to share responsibility for their children's moral and religious education. A national sex education course was scrapped from primary school timetables in September owing to disagreements over content and staff. In a June statement, Archbishop Tadeusz Gocłowski of Gdańsk said the church did not question 'the need for sexual education', but would 'do everything to ensure it is not reduced to pure biology'.

Clergy Problems

Further attempts were made during the year to overcome structural problems in church life. In the Czech Republic, where a new Catholic diocese of Ostrava-Opava was inaugurated in August, a Bishops' Conference spokesman said disputes over the fate of 43 secretly ordained married priests would be 'finally settled' following the establishment of the country's first Greek Catholic exarchate. At least 250 priests and 16 bishops are estimated to have been ordained uncanonically under communist rule. Although over 100 came forward for screening under 1992 Vatican guidelines, many reacted bitterly to the church's reluctance to recognise their ministry.

Over 100 Catholics are studying for the priesthood at Albania's first seminary at Shkodër, opened with German church funding in 1995, and will begin replacing around 300 foreign priests seconded to Albania in the early 1990s. In Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic the shortage of priests and ministers remains an acute problem. Church attendance rates remain low in all three countries – often reaching negligibility in large towns – suggesting that a postcommunist religious revival, insofar as it occurred, has now dissipated.

Although opinion surveys suggest priests are still considered one of Poland's richest social groups, a report on 17 October in the new *Życie* daily said clerical salaries are now well below the national average, leaving many church personnel facing problems meeting tax and heating bills. In the summer Bishop Pieronek warned priests to abide by the law after several had been charged with illegally importing and selling cars under tax exemptions.

An Appeal Court decision in March to overturn the August 1994 acquittal of two Interior Ministry generals on charges of directing the 1984 murder of Fr Jerzy Popiełuszko was widely welcomed as a sign of even-handed justice. In September, the government also agreed to release former secret police agents from state secrecy restrictions, thus allowing them to give evidence during reopened investigations into the murders of several other priests.

Polish police data in January showed that violent attacks on parish presbyteries had

tripled in 1995, while church thefts had also increased. In early 1996 a group of parliamentarians accused the Justice Ministry of ignoring appeals for counter-action after a spate of attacks on priests in the southeastern Sandomierz diocese.

Public Support for the Churches and the Political Context

Attempts to pinpoint the Polish church's current national position must contend with conflicting data. January 1996 church figures suggested that regular Mass attendance had declined to around 33 per cent of Catholics, compared to 37.8 per cent in 1990. Other statistics suggest that vocations to the priesthood have fallen by a third from their 1985–87 highpoint, while female orders now advertise in newspapers after seeing their admissions drop by 35 per cent. Three-quarters of all Poles still declared trust in the Catholic Church in an October survey by the OBOP organisation. Although three-fifths believed the church's public role was too great, half nevertheless thought the state authorities should be 'guided by church social teaching'. The presence of up to four million pilgrims annually at the Jasna Góra national shrine underlines the continuing strength of Polish 'popular Catholicism'. Over 55,000 Masses and 180 conferences are held at Jasna Góra each year, while 200,000 Catholics still complete the traditional August foot pilgrimage and 250,000 petitions are left before the Black Madonna icon. Millions of Polish Catholics prayed before the statue of Our Lady of Fatima when it toured the country during the year, while the October beatification of Wincenty Lewoniuk and 12 Greek Catholic martyrs from Pratulín also testified to the vibrancy of Poland's Christian traditions.

Elsewhere, traditional religious statistics – typified by the breakdown, cited by UN sources as late as 1990, that Albania is 70 per cent Muslim, 20 per cent Orthodox and 10 per cent Catholic – no longer bear any relation to reality. It remains open to question whether communist-era persecution and secularisation merely succeeded in reducing the percentages of traditional religious affiliations, or whether they also decisively altered the relative strengths of mainstream faiths. The second appears true in the Czech Republic, where declared Roman Catholics now outnumber members of the five largest minority churches put together by eight to one, as well as in Romania, where the once-substantial Greek Catholic Church enjoyed only a marginal following of one per cent in a 1992 census.

Public attitudes to the predominant churches vary widely. In a poll by Romania's Urban and Regional Sociology Centre in October the Orthodox Church had the 'respect' of 83 per cent of citizens, followed by the army with 76 per cent and government, parliament and judiciary with just 23–36 per cent. However, Slovakia's Statistical Office gave the Roman Catholic Church a 53 per cent confidence rating in a survey in March 1996, well behind the country's army, state radio and local governments, while only 32 per cent of Czechs claimed to 'trust' the church in a 1996 IVVM agency poll, compared to 54 per cent who voiced opposition.

Parties dominated by former communists won elections in most countries in 1992–94. A possible shift in public attitudes in Eastern Europe away from such parties was widely believed to have been signalled by the autumn election of liberal-conservative presidents in Lithuania, Bulgaria and Romania, all pledged to bring their countries closer to the European Union and NATO. Of the three, Bulgaria's united opposition leader, Petur Stoyanov, took 59.9 per cent of votes in a second-round election on 3 November, easily beating the candidate of the fragmented BSP (40.1 per cent). Two weeks after seeing his Democratic Convention emerge victorious over the ruling Social Democrats in a parliamentary election, Emil

Constantinescu won Romania's presidency with 55.1 per cent on 17 November, ousting Ion Iliescu (44.8 per cent).

However, both these countries are among the least reformed in Eastern Europe. In more prosperous Poland and Hungary former communists still dominate government and parliament. In the Czech Republic the June lower-house election setback did not prevent Klaus' ODS from winning most seats to a revived Senate in November. In Albania President Berisha's Democratic Party retained 68 per cent in a parliamentary ballot on 26 May, which was boycotted by the opposition Albanian Socialist Party amid allegations of vote-rigging. As yet, predictions of a region-wide change in voter allegiances seem premature.

In this uncertain atmosphere, all churches are recognising the need to adjust to rapidly changing needs and expectations, and making slow but steady progress in responding to new challenges.

The opening weeks of 1996 saw a mood of self-criticism in Poland's predominant Roman Catholic Church, as it reeled from President Kwaśniewski's election victory. Cardinal Glemp admitted during a January meeting of the church's General Pastoral Commission in Zakopane that Roman Catholic priests had made 'mistakes' during the campaign by portraying Wałęsa as a 'symbol of Christian values'. He added that they had shown 'little solidarity' with those worst affected by the 'negative results of indiscriminate capitalist rights' and urged the church to follow its 'option for the poor' more faithfully. 'We have become accustomed to saying the clergy were always with the people', Glemp added. 'But in social affairs, it neither was nor is always like that'.

The introspection was soon dispersed, however, by new church-government conflicts after the early 1996 resignation of premier Józef Oleksy amid allegations that he had spied for Russia. Meeting on 28 November, the bishops warned that a 'new attempt' was under way to subject Polish life 'to an ideology largely rejected by the nation'. 'A bid is being made to subordinate the young Polish democracy to a party-associational formation, as can be seen in the persistent resort to totalitarian state practices in which party membership is more important than honesty and personal competence', the statement continued. 'The ruling authorities should serve our nation's common good, not just the interests of the side which won elections. Ignoring this principle may well lead shortly to tensions and social conflicts.' An SLD spokesman condemned the bishops' 'words of hate', while President Kwaśniewski branded the statement 'far removed from reality'; but the end-of-year exchange was merely a sign of the bitter political stand-off which has persisted since the victory of former communists in Poland's 1993 election.

On a more positive note, the contribution of Eastern European Christians to European unity – including their support for a 'churches clause' in a revised Maastricht Treaty – was discussed at several regional conferences. East-West re-integration within the Roman Catholic Church was also taken a stage further by an October meeting of the Council of Catholic Bishops of Europe (CCEE) in Rome, while historical interchurch tensions were debated at the first international ecumenical congress of church historians at Lublin.

In one of the keynote church statements of 1996 the head of Romania's Catholic Bishops' Conference, Archbishop Ioan Robu of Bucharest, urged Christians in his Easter message to continue working 'to overcome the terrifying emptiness of atheism that propagated lies, calumnies, hatred, perversion and cynicism'. Albania's Roman Catholic bishops urged voters in May to ensure that 'true democracy wins once and for all' in the month's election, while Hungary's called on Christians to use the

pope's two-day September visit to reassert 'social and moral values' in national life.

During pilgrimages to Poland and the Czech Republic early in 1997 John Paul II is widely expected to declare the tenth-century St Wojciech Europe's fourth co-patron after SS Benedict, Cyril and Methodius. The CCEE president, Cardinal Miloslav Vlk of Prague, has called on Roman Catholics to follow up appeals by the pope for a full 'accounting of consciences' before the year 2000, as a reminder that the church is 'formed out of people who are sinful and easily lost'.