

Drawing Back the Iron Curtain

TV News Coverage of Eastern Europe in 1989

How have the media covered the reform movement in Eastern Europe? To find out we analyzed all stories on countries in the region that appeared on the television network evening newcasts during 1989. We coded 1068 stories broadcast on the ABC, CBS, and NBC nightly news (total airtime 27 hours 48 minutes). That made events in Eastern Europe the most heavily covered TV news story of 1989.

Major findings:

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■ **Give Gorbys Credit...** - Gorbachev received credit for the changes in Eastern Europe five times as often as the Reagan-Bush defense policies.

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■ **Bad News** - More than four out of five evaluations of the region were negative. Hungary got the best press (50% positive), Romania the worst (98% negative).

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■ **Old News** - Nearly half of all historical film footage appeared on NBC. That network aired twice as many film clips on East Germany's past as ABC and CBS combined.

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■ **Ill Winds** - Only one source in 16 saw any positive effects on either the West or the USSR.

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■ **Czech Points** - East Germany and Poland got the most coverage but Czech nationals were quoted most often.

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■ **Together Again?** - On CBS more than three out of four sources favored German reunification. On ABC and NBC majorities were opposed.

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In the News

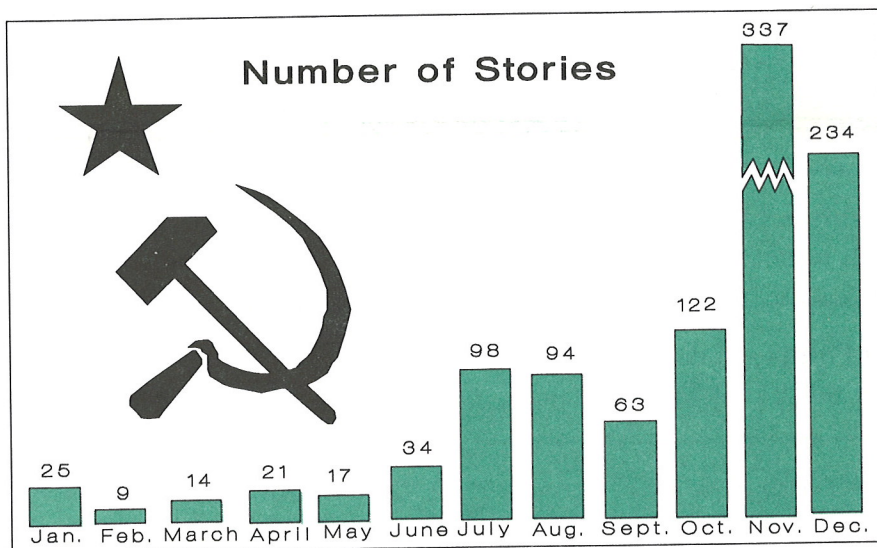
To determine how television news has covered the recent movement for change in Eastern Europe we analyzed all stories that discussed the region during 1989. Altogether, the three network evening newscasts devoted 1068 stories to the region with a cumulative airtime of 27 hours 48 minutes. The networks differed only slightly in their amounts of coverage. CBS devoted the most airtime (9 hours 30 minutes) despite running the fewest stories (331). ABC ran 367 stories (9 hours 12 minutes) and NBC aired 370 reports (9 hours 6 minutes).

The coverage was lightest during the early part of the year, dealing largely with background stories and growing pressure for reforms in Poland and Hungary. The news picked up in May with the rehabilitation of former Hungarian Prime Minister Imre Nagy. In June, the Polish trade union Solidarity won a landslide victory in multi-party elections and Hungary's Communist leader was replaced by a coalition of reformers. Poland and Hungary continued to dominate the coverage throughout the summer, as they were visited by President Bush, Poland named its first non-communist Prime Minister since the second World War, and Hungary began dismantling the "Iron Curtain" along its border with Austria. East Germany was rocked by demonstrations in September and October that forced Communist ruler Erich Honecker from power. But even this coverage paled in comparison to the mega-story still to come.

Spotlight on Eastern Europe



The news peaked in November as ferment embroiled the entire region. East Germany lifted travel restrictions to the West and the Berlin Wall came down. In Bulgaria Todor Zhivkov, the longest ruling Communist leader in Eastern Europe, resigned. Meanwhile, a rapid succession of events brought down the Communist government of Czechoslovakia. Opposition groups pressured the government with demonstrations and strikes that brought outlawed playwright Vaclav Havel to the presidential palace. All this produced a single month's high of 337 stories, more than eleven per day on average, and nearly three times as many as in October.



As turmoil continued to sweep the region, in late December reports of massacres in Romania sparked a bloody civil war that deposed hard-liner Nicolae Ceaucescu. Intensive news coverage included grisly film footage of the executed dictator and his wife Elena. The result was a remarkable total of 591 stories on Eastern Europe in the last two months of 1989, exceeding the already heavy coverage of the previous ten months combined.

Spotlight on Eastern Europe

During 1989 the countries of Eastern Europe appeared more than one thousand times as the topics of TV news stories. East Germany led the way with 396 stories, more than 35% of the total. Also ahead of the pack was Poland, whose 287 stories put it more than 100 stories ahead of Czechoslovakia's 160. The field then narrowed, with 108 stories on Hungary and 100 on Romania. Bulgaria (34), Yugoslavia (11) and Albania (2) were the also rans of the news agenda.

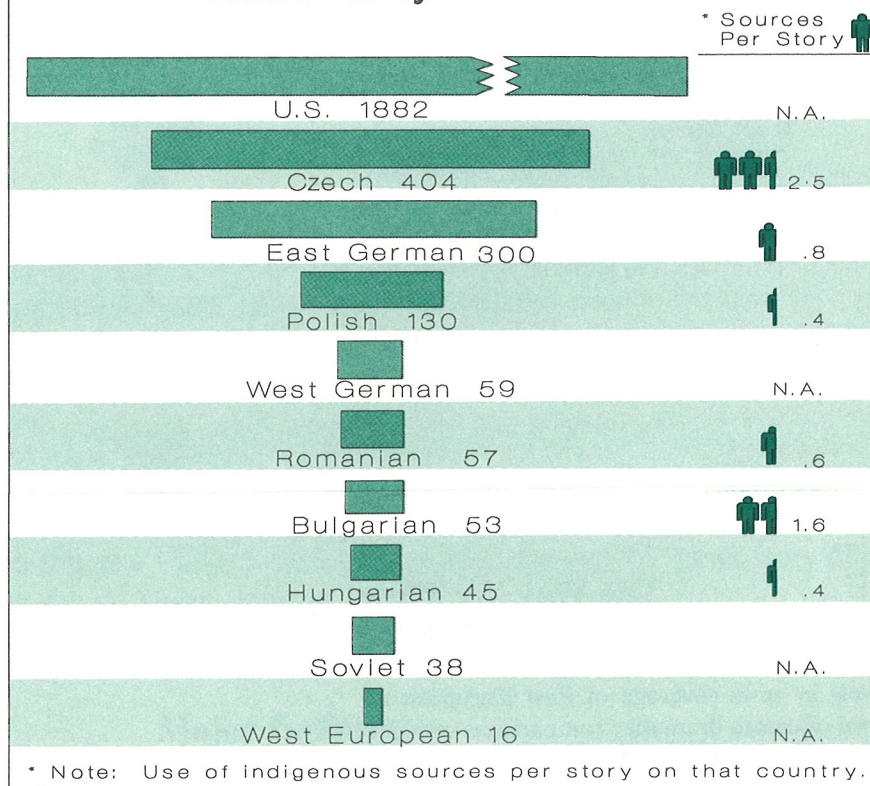
East Germany was propelled to prominence by events like the ouster of Communist ruler Erich Honecker, waves of refugees fleeing to the West, the fall of the Berlin Wall and talk of German reunification. In Poland, the coverage centered on political changes that included multi-party elections and the first non-communist Prime Minister in the Eastern Bloc. Czechoslovakia dominated the news with a rapid wave of democratic reforms in November and December. Political reforms and a visit by President Bush contributed to Hungary's numbers. Romania's coverage jumped sharply in late December, while in the throes of a violent revolution.

Despite overall similarities in their coverage, the networks differed in the attention they paid to particular countries. CBS ran the most stories on Poland (105) while ABC (90) and NBC (92) paid almost identical amounts of attention to this country. On the other hand, CBS ran only 19 stories on Romania, far fewer than either NBC (36) or ABC (45). Thus CBS aired more than five stories on Poland for every story on Romania, compared to a ratio of only two to one on ABC.

Look Who's Talking

The coverage of Eastern Europe featured a multitude of sources, 3047 in all. Americans made up a substantial majority of this total - 1882, or 62% of all sources. Nonetheless, that left 1165 foreign nationals whose

Nationality of Sources



voices were heard on American television. But the Eastern European source list did not follow directly from the networks' news agenda. Although the heaviest coverage went to East Germany and Poland, Czechoslovakians were featured most often as sources, with 404 quotations or citations. East German citizens provided the next largest group of sources (300), but Poles were far behind with only 130 sources. Less frequently heard from were Romanians (57), Bulgarians (53), and Hungarians (45).

To highlight these differences, we computed the number of indigenous sources per story in each country. The news on Czechoslovakia averaged 2.5 indigenous sources per story, three times the rate of East German sources (.8 source per story) and more than five times that of the Poles (less than .5 source per story). Among the region's remaining countries, only Bulgaria averaged more than one indigenous source per story (1.6). Among the reasons for this disparity: stories on Poland dealt in large part with international (especially American) reaction to the events there. Stories on East Germany frequently featured comments from accessible West Germans, especially on the subject of reunification. Finally, Czechoslovakia provided an

"Freedom is like crabgrass, it's hard to kill."

-Bruce Morton
CBS, 11/10/89

unbeatable combination for television interviewers - lots of rallies and demonstrations, along with ready access to the participants. As a result, that country's coverage featured by far the most man-on-the-street interviews.

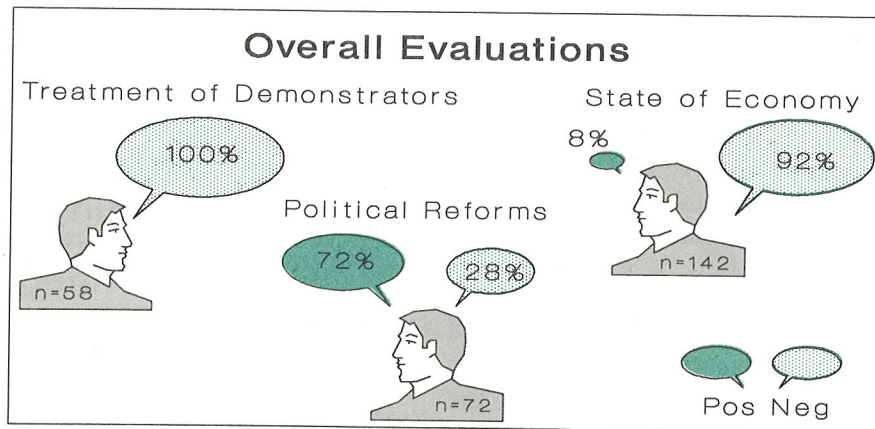
Outside the region, West German sources were cited 59 times, reflecting their country's significance as a haven for refugees, a champion for change and a model for reform. The Soviets were also coded frequently (38 sources) mostly providing official reaction to the upheaval.

There were marked differences in the degree to which the networks relied on indigenous sources in the various East European countries. NBC featured by the far the most Czech sources (175); ABC followed with 135 and CBS with 94. By contrast, CBS quoted Poles nearly as often (63 times) as its two competitors combined - 34 on ABC and 33 on NBC. ABC quoted Bulgarian sources far more often than the other networks (28) (CBS 8, NBC 17). However, ABC used only 5 Hungarian sources compared to 22 on CBS and 18 on NBC.

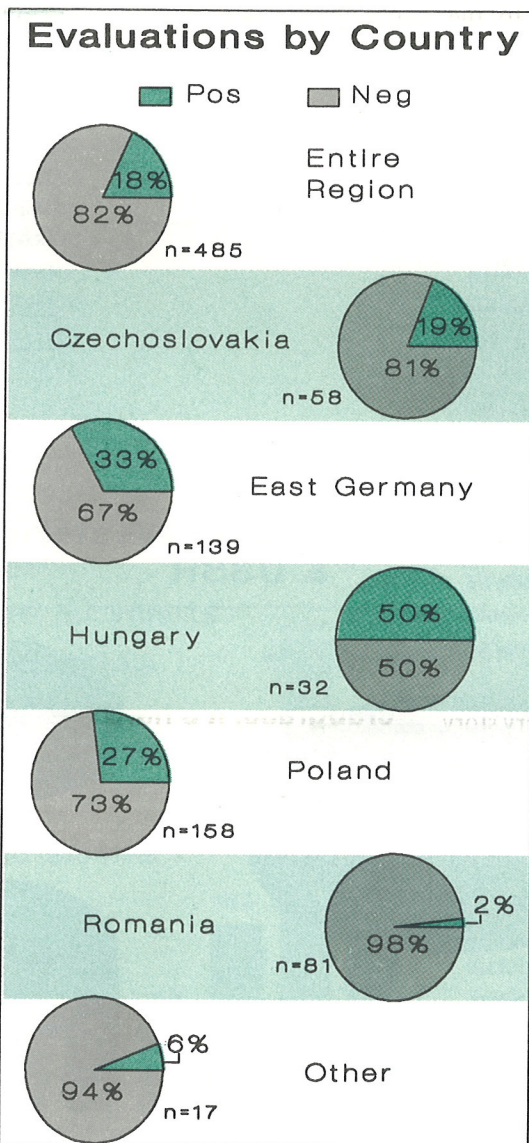
Pros and Cons

We examined televised opinion on East Europe, defined as positive or negative viewpoints on topical issues. The state of the East European economies led the way with 142 evaluations. An overwhelming 92% of these evaluations were negative. Much of the criticism focused on long food lines, burdensome foreign debt and low worker productivity. The few positive evaluations came largely from comparative assessments, e. g., arguments that the reforms will make things better.

Opinions on political reforms were the next most frequent topic discussed. Seventy two percent of all sources praised such reforms as open elections and the lifting of travel restrictions, making this the only major area of good press for the region. Sample



positive assessment, by a Soviet officer, "I think the East German government took the right steps." (ABC, 11/12/89) Sample negative vote, by an East German citizen, "We think it is not enough...it's not good." (CBS, 11/6/89).



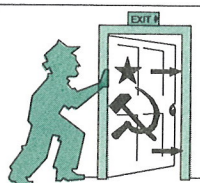
The worst press concerned the treatment of demonstrators; 58 sources unanimously condemned the government crackdowns. Most of the criticisms (45 sources) were aimed at Romania. The coverage centered on reports of massacres, mass graves and brutal treatment of demonstrators.

A notable feature of this coverage was the willingness of American journalists to state their own opinions. Reporters accounted for nearly two out of every five opinions (38%) aired on conditions in Eastern Europe. But on-air journalistic opinion did not differ sharply from assessments by other sources.

With the sole exception of Hungary, all East European countries were assessed in overwhelmingly negative terms. Poland, the country evaluated most often (158 times), came in with a 73% negative rating. Its failing economy accounted for a large part of this criticism. East Germany, once praised as East Europe's economic success story, was assessed 139 times, 67% of them negative. Czechoslovakia (81% negative) ranked second only to Romania in negative evaluations. The bloody repression and revolution in Romania sparked an intense period of evaluation (81 times), most late in December. Vir-

tually all assessments were negative (98%), including 45 negative evaluations on the treatment of demonstrators.

Hungary alone achieved a balanced rating of 50% positive and 50% negative evaluations. This relatively positive portrayal was due in large part to its history as the most reform-minded Communist country, whose transition to relative democracy was easiest. The three networks were remarkably similar in their evaluative coverage of Eastern Europe. The networks differed slightly in their treatment of particular countries, but the ratio of good to bad press never varied much from one network to another.



Leading Contributors to Change

Freedom of Movement	32
Failure of Communism	29
Soviet Reforms	20
Domestic Repression	13
Polish Reforms	8
U.S. Policies	4

Note: Number of sources listing each factor.

year, exceeding a certain level. And that was the main reason why we were losing the people." Simon then asked, "So the Lenin Shipyard was destroyed by Leninist economics?" The reply: "You can say so." (CBS, 7/11)

Frequent credit (20 mentions) was also given to the reforms Gorbachev brought to the USSR. For example, ABC's Barry Dunsmore cited an unnamed West German diplomat who asserted that, "East Germany's Stalinist leaders consider Gorbachev's economic and political reforms the principal cause of their problem." (ABC, 9/12) Indeed, Gorbachev won the race for credit in a runaway over Reagan and Bush. The argument that the

hardline defense policies of the Reagan and Bush administrations helped cause the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe was cited by only 4 sources. One of the exceptions was a Republican congressman who declared, "Thank you, Ronald Reagan. Without you it would never have happened." (ABC 11/14) The favored perspective was that Communism in the Eastern Bloc crumbled from the inside out, not from the outside in.

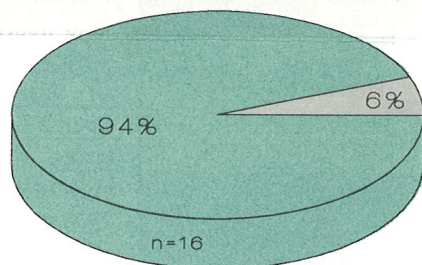
Where Credit Is Due

We noted all explanations that the networks offered for the sudden outbreak of political and economic reform. Topping the list was the new-found freedom of movement in the region. Thirty-two sources credited the opening of borders and increased mobility with precipitating some aspect of the upheaval. Included here were the dismantling of the "Iron Curtain" between Hungary and Austria, the ban on travel restrictions, and the waves of refugees to the West.

Among the more fundamental underlying causes cited, the failure of Communism was paramount, with 29 mentions. Various sources pointed out the social, political and economic ruin wrought by Marxism-Leninism. For example, an executive at the Lenin Shipyards in Gdansk told CBS's Bob Simon, "We were not allowed to raise the salaries above, from year to

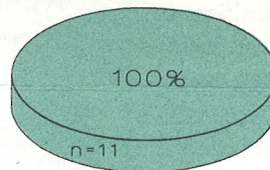
Effects of Reform on Western Allies & USSR

Overall Effects on Others

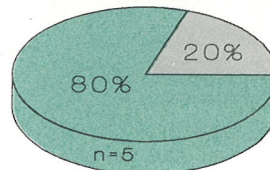


Positive Evaluations
Negative Evaluations

Effects on Western Allies



Effects on the USSR



Note: n= number of evaluations.

Ill Winds of Change

The birth of reforms and new freedoms for Eastern Europe might be assumed to have a positive effect on all involved. However, television news coverage featured mostly negative assessments of the effect the region's reforms will have on both the Western Allies and the Soviet Union. Out

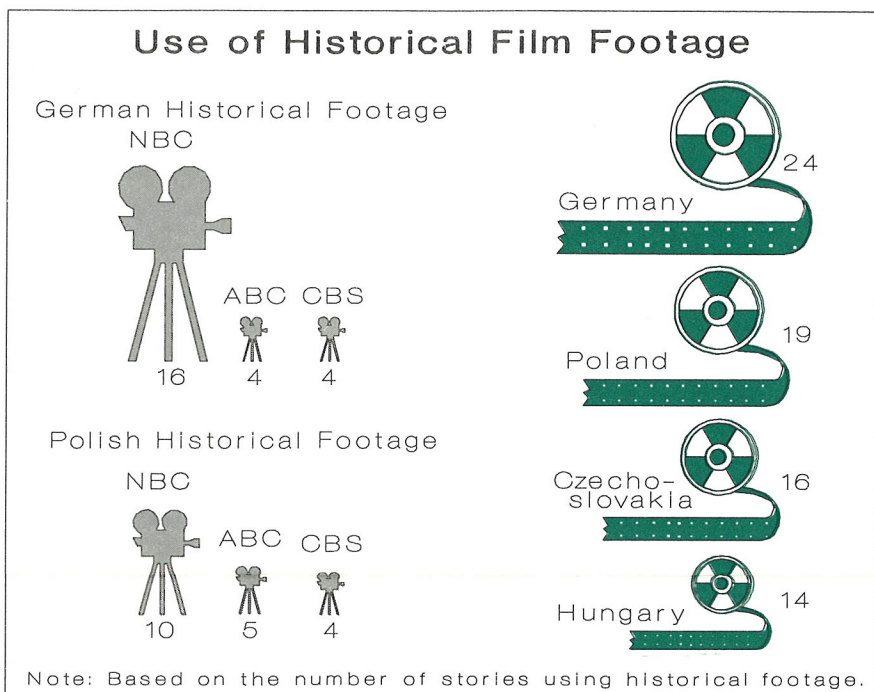
of 16 sources who assessed the economic, political, and military effects on either the East or West, only one was positive. No sources as-

sessed the effects on the West as positive, while 11 stressed the downside. For example, in a story dealing with the effects of defense cuts in the U.S., CBS's David Martin concluded: "There will almost certainly be some short term unemployment as production lines close or slow down." Similarly, four out of five sources gave negative assessments of the effects on the Soviets. For instance, on Aug. 22 ABC quoted Antony Polonsky of the London School of Economics, "(Gorbachev's) hardline opponents can say 'look what you've done, this demonstrates that as soon as you relax the brakes the system becomes unmanageable.'"

The Way We Were

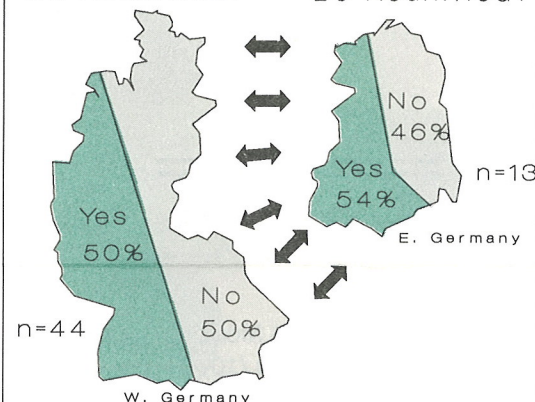
Historical film footage was used extensively in news coverage of East European reform efforts to dramatize comparisons with past struggles (88 stories). More stories (24) contained historical footage of East Germany than any other country. Events shown most often were the 1953 Berlin uprising and past attempts to escape to the West. Poland was second with 19 stories, many showing the rise of Lech Walesa and Solidarity. Czechoslovakia (16) and Hungary (14) followed, as the networks featured footage of their unsuccessful uprisings in 1968 and 1956 respectively.

NBC used the backdrop of historical film footage to frame its coverage nearly as often as the other two networks combined (43 of 88 stories). The difference was especially pronounced in East German coverage, as NBC aired 16 stories with historical footage, twice as many as the other two networks combined (4 on ABC, 4 on CBS). NBC also ran the majority of the Polish film footage (10 stories, compared to 5 on ABC and 4 on CBS).

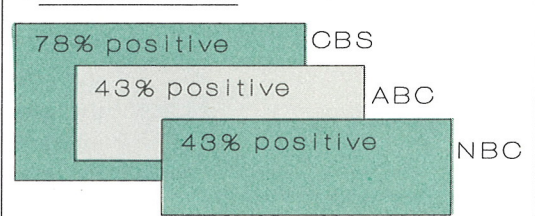


A Question of Reunification

Should Germany Be Reunified? Will Germany Be Reunified?



Assessments



The German Question

Possible reunification of East and West Germany became a hot topic in 1989. The media vote split evenly as 22 sources favored unification and 22 opposed it. Sample pro-vote, from West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl: "We are one nation. And we belong together." (ABC 11/10) Sample anti-vote, from Soviet spokesman Gennadi Gerasimov: "Not a single country in Europe wishes to have a united Germany because it fears the present stability in Europe would be undermined." (NBC 11/29)

Although sources were split overall, the networks differed significantly on this issue. On CBS more than three out of four sources (78%) favored unification. On both ABC and NBC, in contrast, this position attracted support from only 43% of those quoted. Predictions on the outcome of the German question were balanced. Seven sources predicted that Germany will again be unified, while six disputed this forecast.