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Communists in Hungary Meet This Week for Policy Review

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BELGRADE, Yugoslavia, March 14—Hungarian Communists will gather in Budapest next week for their first party congress in five years to examine anew the health and prospects of what has been termed "goulash Communism."

The odds are that the actions of the congress will not entirely please either Hungarian liberals or Moscow.

Hungary, a recent visitor there found, has attained her own balance between totalitarian rule and relaxed Western-style prosperity. Since the formula is apparently in favor with the overwhelming majority of the more than 10 million Hungarians, fundamental changes seem unlikely.

In the eyes of most people, the credit is due mainly to Janos Kadar, First Secretary of the Communist party, whose 11th congress, beginning Monday, is certain to reconfirm him in his post.

Few world leaders have succeeded in changing their personal image as radically as Mr. Kadar has in his 18 years in office.

Older people remember with a shudder the autumn days in 1956, when Soviet tanks ground their way across Hungary, crushing the anti-Kremlin revolt led by the Communist Government itself. The popular head of that Government, Imre Nagy, was executed, and the rebels were destroyed.

Object of Opprobrium

For many Hungarians special opprobrium seemed attached to Mr. Kadar, who rode to power with the Soviet tanks; in the process deserting and denouncing his former friend, Mr. Nagy.

Mr. Kadar was widely expected to run the country as a harsh Stalinist dictator. Instead, he slowly and cautiously relaxed political restraints, introduced far-reaching economic reform, giving industrial managers relative independence from central control, and effectively diverted Soviet meddling.

Even dissidents acknowledge that he has succeeded where others probably would have failed.

"We are under some restraints, of course," one said. "It is not like working in a Western country. But I don't think any of us know of a single writer or artist or scholar in a Hungarian jail for political reasons at the moment, and that's something. If there could actually be such a thing in Hungary today as a free election, I don't think there's any doubt that Kadar would be elected leader."

In any case, many who could

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be delegates to the party congress were children when Mr. Kadar was given his Kremlin mandate. Of a party membership estimated at 750,000, more than half joined after 1956.

Forgive and Forget

Even those who suffered directly then seem to have forgiven and forgotten for the most part. Many thousands who fled to Western Europe, Canada and the United States have returned, preferring life at home to what they found abroad.

There is a feeling among many party members these days that things may have gone a little too far and too fast, and that if not actual retrenchment, some consolidation of positions is in order. The party congress will presumably act on this feeling.

The Communist leadership's popularity seems due in large part to the great material progress of recent years. Communists are glad to be popular, but many are worried.

The most immediate concern is that prosperity at the current level may not last much longer and that people will blame the Communists for the same reason they now praise them.

Domestic Prices Affected

The higher oil prices recently invoked by the Soviet Union and the rocketing costs of imports from the inflation-ridden West have begun affecting Hungarian price levels, which have been artificially maintained by enormous subsidies. People seem certain to face much greater inflation or shortages, or both.

The Communists also believe that people in general and party members in particular are sliding into "bourgeois" ways all too quickly as a result of several years of material well-being. Party leaders are not amused by the saying that young people prize drivers' licenses more highly than party membership cards.

It was no surprise, therefore, that the guidelines issued in preparation for the congress emphasize the need to improve ideological standards along with living standards.

The Communist leaders appear to recognize that revolutionary ideology is hard to maintain in the face of proliferating creature comforts. They are also aware that the Soviet Union—which, inconveniently, owes Hungary a lot of money—would not long tolerate real political backsliding. A Hungarian said,

"We Magyars are a resourceful lot," a Hungarian said. "We have a way of losing wars but getting fat all the same."

