

**HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT**

# Europe between East and West: looking back, moving forward

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Elena Danescu (pictured) is a research scientist and PhD in the Contemporary History of Europe Department at the University of Luxembourg. Photo: Elena Danescu



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**“Deep divisions have emerged between East and West [Europe] on matters such as freedom, justice and democracy,” writes the University of Luxembourg’s Dr Elena Danescu. In this article, the researcher explores the origins of these divisions.**

When Günter Schabowski, Information Secretary in the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), announced on 9 November 1989 that citizens of the GDR would now be able to travel abroad without having to meet the previous conditions, “effective immediately, without delay”, no one could have imagined that this statement was going to change the face of the world. East and West Germans flocked in huge numbers to the border crossings between the GDR and the FRG, and to those between East and West Berlin. The collapse of the Berlin Wall, a powerful symbol of the bipolar world, prompted several seismic geopolitical shifts--German reunification, the end of communism and the transition to democracy in the Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs), the EU’s eastward enlargement, the collapse of the USSR and the Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001)--which redrew the map of Europe.

Over the past three decades, the CEECs have become players in their own right in the Euro-Atlantic community. More recently, against a backdrop of recurring crises including the Covid-19 pandemic, deep divisions have emerged between East and West on matters such as freedom, justice and democracy, weakening the European project as a whole. But what are the causes of this breakdown in understanding--and what impact has it had? What can be done to overcome it? This article attempts to provide some answers to these legitimate questions.

## **Central and Eastern Europe: crossroads and connections**

“Central Europe” is a geographical concept that emerged in France in around 1875, under the influence of Élisée Reclus (1830-1905) and Auguste Himly (1823-1906), to refer to “the region situated to the east of Germany and to the west of Russia”. This vague definition gave rise to multiple interpretations. The notion of a “Middle Europe” emerged a century later as a way of identifying shared characteristics that were distinctive to the various entities in this area--Central Europe, South-East Europe, Baltic Europe and the fringes of Russia. Adopting a regional approach, historian Fernand Braudel (1902-1985) and geographer Yves Lacoste (1929) substantiated this new concept and developed it through an interdisciplinary lens, drawing on aspects of history, geography, sociology and ethnography.

Nowadays, Central and Eastern Europe refers to those countries which are mostly situated eastward of the 15th meridian east, but the term is generally

used as shorthand for the former countries in the Eastern bloc--the states that emerged after the dissolution of the USSR, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. Despite their geographical situation, Sweden, Finland, Greece and Cyprus are not usually considered CEECs.

From a longer-term historical perspective, the CEECs can be seen to share characteristics resulting from imperial influences in the countries during the Middle Ages. These include a weak state infrastructure, border instability, vulnerability to imperial powers (the Ottoman, Russian and Holy Roman Empires), ethnic and linguistic complexity, heterogeneous populations and the co-existence of several religions (Catholicism, Protestantism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Judaism and Islam)[1]. In the 20th century, the CEECs acquired a new shared heritage derived from the Soviet model--which they developed after 1945 in Moscow's shadow, with very little room for national manoeuvre--within the new "people's democracies", Cominform (1947), the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon - 1949) and the Warsaw Pact (1955). The fall of communism liberated nationalities, first in the satellite states and then in the USSR itself. The CEECs continued on their shared path, embarking on transitions to the rule of law, a free market economy and Euro-Atlantic integration.

## **1989, a turning point**

In 1989, a series of events occurred that had major repercussions for the CEECs.

In April 1989, the Polish communist regime was forced to legalise the Solidarność movement (founded in 1980 by Lech Wałęsa and Anna Walentynowicz), which advocated trade union pluralism. The elections in June 1989 brought Tadeusz Mazowiecki to power as the first non-communist head of government in Eastern Europe, and in December 1990, Lech Wałęsa was elected as president of Poland. In May 1989, Hungary--which together with Poland was the most reform-oriented country in the communist bloc--cut the barbed wire separating it from Austria at the border crossing point of Sopronkohida/Sankt Margarethen, before replacing its Stalinist constitution with a pluralist political system. The Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party was dissolved in October of that year. In November 1989, demonstrations by students from Bratislava and Prague, supported by the Catholic Primate of Czechoslovakia, galvanised a

popular uprising throughout the country. This was the “Velvet Revolution”, which propelled dissident writer Václav Havel to power; he was subsequently elected as president of Czechoslovakia, while Alexander Dubček (known for the slogan “socialism with a human face” in 1968) became chairman of the Federal Parliament. In Romania, the mass riots and protests that began in Timisoara in mid-December 1989 swept across the whole country, leading to violent unrest. The dictator Nicolae Ceausescu was executed on 25 December 1989 and his regime collapsed. The parliament that was formed after the first free elections in May 1990 gave the country a new democratic constitution. Bulgaria abandoned communism in December 1990 when a coalition government was introduced, and went on to adopt a new constitution in July 1991.

On 28 November 1989, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Chancellor Helmut Kohl announced a plan for German unity as part of the European Community and NATO, but the formation of a state with a population of 80 million sparked fears because of its newfound political, economic and financial influence, which many thought would disturb the European balance established after the Second World War. On 1 July 1990, the FRG and the GDR sealed their economic and monetary union, and on 31 August they concluded the Unification Treaty, which came into force on 3 October. The GDR ceased to exist and Germany became a unified, sovereign country, with Berlin as its capital.

## **The dissolution of the USSR**

Faced with a deep-seated ideological, economic and social crisis, the Soviet Union eventually crumbled. The wide-ranging reforms--Glasnost (transparency of information and freedom of expression) and Perestroika (“restructuring”)--initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev when he came to power in March 1985 were not enough to save an economy dominated by the military-industrial complex, bled dry by the arms race with the United States and weakened by the decade-long war with Afghanistan (the Red Army withdrew in 1989). The Soviet republics began expressing a desire for autonomy. In March 1990, Lithuania proclaimed its independence and in June, Russia declared its sovereignty under the impetus of Gorbachev’s political opponent, Boris Yeltsin. Gorbachev’s efforts to save the USSR by means of a new treaty failed, as did the attempted coup d’état by communist hardliners on 19 August 1991, which led nine other Soviet republics

to proclaim their independence. On 8 December of that year, the accords concluded by the leaders of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus dissolved the USSR but created the Commonwealth of Independent States, composed of 15 sovereign countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan).

In a televised address on 25 December 1991 announcing his resignation and the end of the USSR, Gorbachev affirmed: “We live in a new world. The Cold War has ended, the arms race has stopped, as has the insane militarization which mutilated our economy, public psyche and morals. The threat of a world war has been removed. [...] We opened ourselves to the world, gave up interference into other people’s affairs, the use of troops beyond the borders of the country [...] [2].

Thirty years later, these words have a particular resonance in light of recent geopolitical developments in Russia.

## **On the road to European integration**

When the former Soviet satellite states applied for accession to the European Union, the EU Member States sought a guarantee that European values and identity would be maintained over the long term. The European Council on 22 June 1993 in Copenhagen determined three series of accession criteria aimed at the CEECs: 1) political criteria on respect for and promotion of democracy; 2) economic criteria on a free market economy; 3) an obligation for candidate countries to implement the body of EU law (the “acquis”) and adhere to the aims of political, economic and monetary union. These conditions were enshrined in the Treaty on European Union (TEU, 2007), in article 49 on compliance with the fundamental principles of the Union (human dignity, freedom, democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights and the protection of minorities).

Applying for accession to the EU initiates a procedure in which the Member States, voting unanimously, have the final say. The Copenhagen criteria are not legally binding, however. The European Commission monitors compliance with the criteria via a system of annual evaluation reports that was introduced in

1997. If it considers that the necessary reforms have not yet been implemented, the accession process continues (there are currently seven candidate and potential candidate countries).

In the late 1990s, given the scale of the task and in the absence of a clear prospect of accession, the CEECs became disenchanted. The European institutions therefore decided to set an accession date (2004) for the ten “best candidates” --Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. They were followed by Bulgaria and Romania, whose Treaty of Accession was signed on 25 April 2005 at Neumünster Abbey, under the Luxembourg Presidency of the Council of the EU.

## **Difficult relations and high hopes**

The confirmation of the EU’s eastward enlargement led some CEECs to ease up in their efforts to adapt to EU requirements. Several states even openly challenged the Copenhagen criteria, and the EU was unable to force them to comply with its fundamental principles. It seems that the CEECs, long deprived of the ability to exercise effective sovereignty, feared that they would find themselves in the same situation within the European Union--although they felt deeply European. This was the case for Hungary, Poland and, to a lesser extent, Slovenia and Romania, where the rule of law was flouted by attacks on the independence of the judiciary, media pluralism, freedom of expression and the protection of refugees and minorities. In December 2017, the EU invoked article 7 of the TEU against Poland. The article provides for the suspension of the voting rights of a Member State in the Council if there is “a clear risk of a serious breach” of the values of the Union. Since the measure can only come into effect following a unanimous vote in the Council, which was not achieved, the sanction was never applied. Since 2020, the European Commission has published an annual EU-wide Rule of Law Report, but this only serves a preventive role. In its 2021-2027 budget, the Commission proposed making access to cohesion funds (of which Poland is the biggest potential beneficiary) dependent on compliance with the rule of law. With its “NextGenerationEU” post-pandemic recovery and resilience plan, for which an overall budget of €1,820 billion has been earmarked, the EU is introducing a conditionality regulation for Member States.

[1] See Gradvohli, Paul (ed.), *L'Europe médiane au XXe siècle*, Prague: Publications du CEFRES, 2011.

[2] Source: <https://apnews.com/article/bcdbf49be92683caa5b4723886baafcd>

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