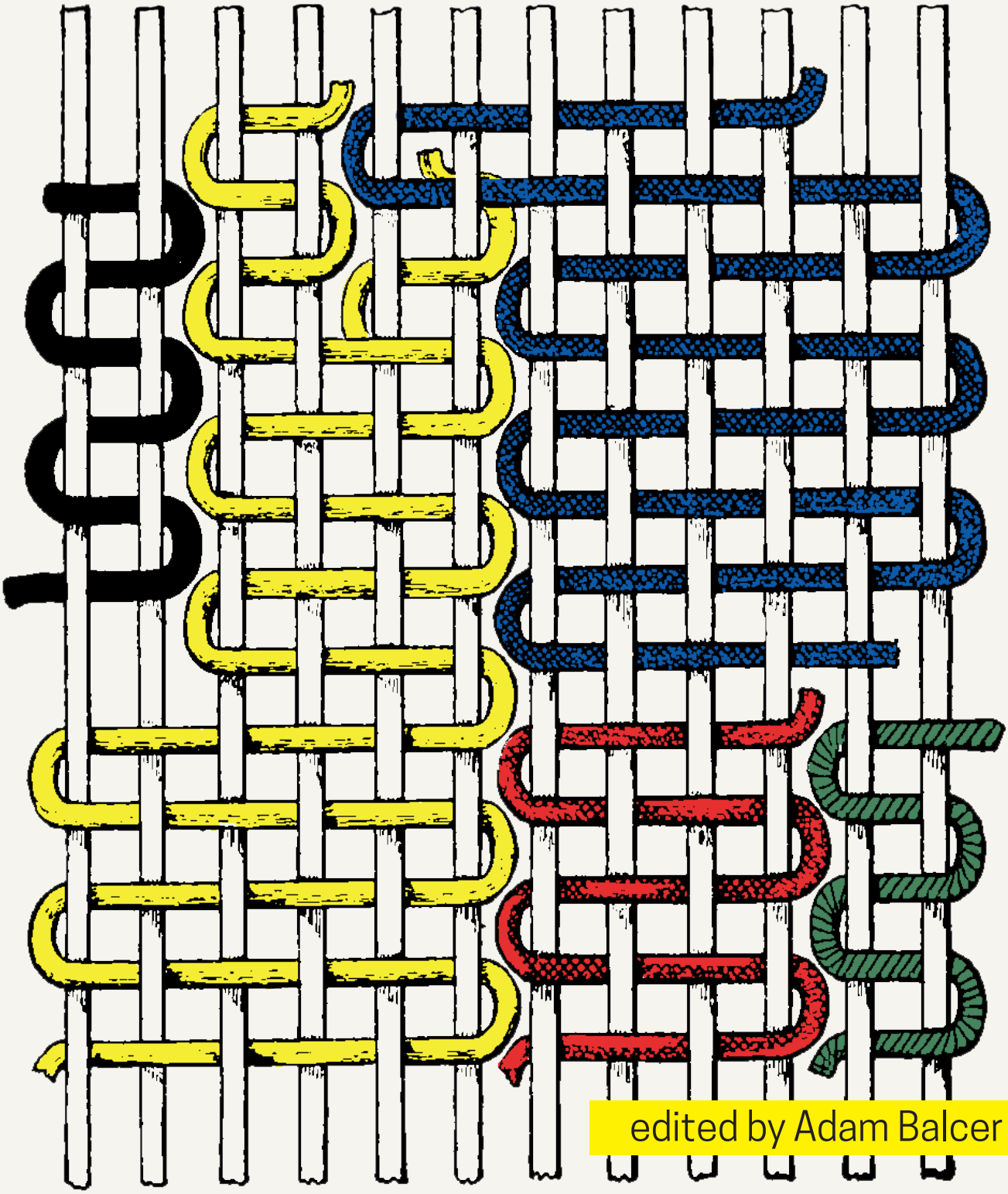
A European success story?

Central Europe from democratic revolutions to EU accession (1989-2004) and beyond



edited by Adam Balcer

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Introduction

The year 1989 was a breakthrough moment in history not only for Central Europe but also Europe as a whole and the world. Places such as Gate Number Two at the Gdańsk Shipyard, the Wenceslas Square in Prague as well as the reburial ceremony of Imre Nagy at the Heroes Square in Budapest and the fall of the Berlin Wall became symbols of Central European democratic revolutions that took place that year. The democratic transitions that these events started were the necessary steps which Central European countries had to take to join the European Union and NATO. The processes of these transitions, from authoritarian rule to democracy, from planned economy to free market, were long but successful. Namely, the year 2004, which is when the Central European states joined the European Union, became the symbolic year of the reunification of Europe. The role of Germany was very important in this process. Specifically, while Germany had a large contribution to the 2004 EU enlargement, the German reunification in 1990 can even be regarded as the first step in the post-Cold War reunification of Central Europe with the rest of the continent. Unfortunately, the outcomes of these developments have turned out not to be always positive. We can see a reverse tendency in Hungary especially, but also in Poland, although to a smaller degree. These two countries are now said to have been backsliding from liberal democracy to an illiberal system.

To present the post-1989 developments as a shared heritage of all European citizens WiseEuropa together with the city of Gdańsk, the Hungarian Europe Society, the Metropolitan University in Prague, the Institute for European Politics in Berlin and the Jan Nowak Jeziorański College of Eastern Europe in Wrocław launched a project titled "A European success story? Central Europe from democratic revolutions to EU accession (1989-2004) and beyond". This project was co-funded by the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union.

Within the framework of the project, we have prepared this publication. It serves as a special edition to *New Eastern Europe* which is a bi-monthly magazine published in Poland with a focus on post-communist countries. The main aim of our publication is to provide all European citizens – regardless of where they live – with an interpretation of Europe's historic watersheds which took place in 1989 and 2004. We believe that these two events are an undeniable part of our common heritage.

We open the publication with a voice from Gdańsk because we are convinced that "everything started in Gdańsk". These are also the words shared with us here by Aleksandra Dulkiewicz, the mayor of the city of Gdańsk who is also a contributing author to this publication. Indeed, Gdańsk was a birthplace of the Solidarity trade union and the mass social movement that greatly contributed to the abolishing of the communist regime in Poland and the later democratic transition of the Central and Eastern European region.

The next essay titled “Central Europe in the European Union and beyond. Legacy of 1989 and 2004” was written by Adam Balcer. It places the transition of Central Europe in wider contexts: European and global. This text is followed by two case studies, namely that of Hungary and Czechia. István Hegedűs, in his text titled “Hungary at the crossroads: challenges of democratic backslide and Euroscepticism” analyses the processes in his country which have taken place since 1989 and which included the building of liberal democracy based on the rule of law and free market economy and the democratic backsliding which has been taking place in Hungary since 2010.

Michal Klíma in his article titled “The history of post-communism in a nutshell: Czechia after 1989” argues, in turn, that in the case of Czechia the legacy of post-communism still remains an issue. A similar conclusion can be drawn from the text titled “Unified but different? Assessment of the benefits and costs of German reunification” co-authored by Katrin Böttger and Simone Klee who show the still present legacy of East Germany in today’s German public and social life.

Believing that the European project is not only an achievement of the past, but also a vision of the future, we are publishing two essays written by two students who won the contest that we organized within the framework of our project. The winners and their essays are: Marie Kepler and her text titled “Central Europe, the EU and I” and Tomasz Kubiak and his essay titled “The breakthrough moments of 1989 and 2004 – how freedom brought Wrocław back to us”. With their writing we would like to draw the attention of all Europeans, but especially the young generation, to the historical roots of our mutual belonging to the European Union and the values around which we have formed our shared European community.

Adam Balcer

Everything started in Gdańsk

Aleksandra Dulkiewicz

The Autumn of Nations which took place in 1989 dramatically changed the course of global history, initiating the end of the Cold World and overcoming the division of Europe which was established as the consequence of the Second World War. The revolutions of 1989 created the necessary preconditions for the 2004 enlargement of the European Union, the largest in the EU's history. The city of Gdańsk played a crucial role in these events. Indeed, there is no exaggeration to say that everything started in Gdańsk.

The year 1989, often called annus mirabilis (a miraculous year), was a turning point in the history of both Central Europe and Europe as a whole. In Central Europe the democratic opposition managed, in a short period of time, to oust, mainly peacefully, the communist elites which by then had been ruling for several decades. As the birthplace of the Solidarity movement, Gdańsk had a large and significant contribution to the peaceful regime change and democratization of Central Europe. Solidarity was established here at the shipyards in 1980. It was the first independent trade union in the Soviet bloc since the 1940s. Its membership peaked to 10 million, representing one-third of Poland's working-age population. During the martial law the whole movement was forced underground as it was outlawed and repressed by the communist regime. Yet it survived this oppression and throughout the 1980s continued to operate underground.

In 1988-1989 the movement became again openly present in public life and started to organise massive pro-democratic demonstrations across Poland. Gdańsk again became the union's and movement's main base of operations. The demonstrations created a domino effect in the region, facilitating the democratization of other Central Europe states as well as the German reunification in 1990. These events can be regarded as preliminary steps of the later integration of Central Europe with the European Union. Certainly, Gdańsk occupied a central place in the developments that started in 1989, both in symbolic and historic terms. On September 1st 1939 the Second World War broke out here. It was, in absolute numbers, the deadliest conflict in human history. It also set the stage for the division of Europe between the totalitarian Soviet bloc and the democratic Euro-Atlantic community. This division started to unravel only in 1989.

The Gate Number Two at the Gdańsk Shipyard is a historical gate leading into Gdańsk Shipyard. On August 31st 1980 Lech Wałęsa, the leader of the Solidarity movement, stood at the gate when he announced the end of the strike and the signing of the Gdańsk Accords. In 2014 this place received the European Heritage Label. Source: Shutterstock

After the 1989 devolution of powers, local government became the key pillar of democratisation and integration of Central Europe with the EU. Gdańsk also played an important role in this process of building of local governance from scratch and its further development. The city in fact became a forerunner of these processes. As a result, the first edition of participatory budget was organised in 2012 in Gdańsk. As a result, a citizens' panel to evaluate the city budget was established. Gdańsk was the second city in Poland to launch this mechanism.

In 2016 Gdańsk established the first immigrant council in our country. Within the council, Gdańsk residents of foreign origin advise the city mayor and other representatives of local authorities on migrant and refugee integration policies. In 2018 the City Council of Gdańsk adopted an equal treatment model, which is the first one in Poland and most comprehensive so far. This model addresses discrimination and secures equal treatment for all, regardless of one's gender, age, national origin, religious beliefs, disability status or sexual orientation. For introducing and implementing this model, Gdańsk was awarded the Innovation in Politics Award by the Council of Europe within the category of human rights. Moreover, in 2019 Gdańsk received the Prince or Princess of Asturias Award for Concord. This award is aimed at recognizing the work of defending and advancing human rights, as well as promoting and protecting peace, freedom, solidarity, world heritage and, in general, the progress of humanity.

Since 1989 Gdańsk continued also to play the role of an important "democracy-provider" in Europe since the end of the Cold War did not bring about complete unification of our continent under the umbrella of the European Union. Poland's eastern border divides the continent between the EU and the countries of Eastern Europe. Gdańsk engaged greatly in supporting reforms in Ukraine by

sharing its know-how regarding local government. In 2017 Gdańsk co-founded the Local Democracy Agency in Mariupol Ukraine, which aims at implementing best democratic practices, namely constructive dialogue between community members and local government as well as participatory democracy tools for fair and sustainable development. Since 2020 Gdańsk and its citizens have been providing large support to the Belarusian democratic opposition, organizing solidarity rallies, exhibitions and collecting financial resources.

The late mayor Paweł Adamowicz, who was first elected to this office in 1998, contributed greatly to these developments. He focused his activities on fostering solidarity, integration of migrants and minorities, dialogue with civil society, and promotion of fundamental rights on the grassroots level. Adamowicz was particularly dedicated to the commemoration of the Solidarity tradition in Gdańsk and always treated it as the main source of inspiration for his city and Europe. Upon his initiative the building of the European Solidarity Centre was opened to the public in 2014. It is a museum and library devoted to the history of Solidarity and other opposition movements in communist Eastern Europe. Adamowicz served as our city's mayor until his assassination on January 13th 2019. He became a vivid symbol of local leaders defending fundamental European values against authoritarian policies of the central government. To commemorate his legacy the city of Gdańsk together with the International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN) and the European Committee of the Regions established in 2021 the Mayor Paweł Adamowicz Award for courage and excellence in promotion of freedom, solidarity and equality.

As Mayor of Gdańsk since 2019 I am deeply convinced that today, when nationalism, populism, and authoritarian tendencies are on the rise in Europe, particularly in Central European states and undermines the unity of the EU, it is very important to recall the legacy of the democratic transition of 1989 and the largest European integration of 2004. Indeed, this legacy may serve as a crucial source of inspiration for activities aimed at the revival of European values.

Aleksandra Dulkiewicz is a Polish lawyer and the mayor of Gdańsk since March 2019. In 2014 she became the leader of the biggest political club in the city council. From March 2017 to January 2019 she served as a deputy mayor of the city.

Central Europe in the European Union and beyond.

Legacy of 1989 and 2004

Adam Balcer

Revolutions of 1989 and the accession of Central Europe to the European Union in 2004 resulted in a large progress of convergence between the region and western Europe. However, today we are seeing the reverse taking place. The negative trends that are currently underway should be treated with greater seriousness by western European states (Germany especially) as in the long term they may fatally undermine the EU's cohesion.

The years 1989 and 2004 were the breakthrough moments in Europe's modern history. The former brought an end to communist rule in the socialist bloc while the latter saw the beginning of an eastward expansion of the European Union. Put together, they marked a true victory of democratisation in Europe but also influenced the rest of the world. Equally importantly, both years were tightly intertwined. Indeed, the success of 2004 would not be possible without the breakthrough of 1989. Both contributed to a deep and comprehensive transformation of Central Europe, the EU and Europe as a whole. An impressive progress of convergence of Central Europe with the most developed parts of the continent, that is western and northern Europe, were the key outcome of this process.

However, these positive developments, which at first seemed irreversible, have experienced a considerable retreat in Central Europe in recent years. This has been the case with Hungary and Poland, while the democratic backslide in Czechia and Slovakia has been prevented but with a great effort. Thus, it can be said that the contestation of the legacy of 1989 and 2004 constitutes to be a leit motif of negative trends that we have been observing in the region. These processes have wider implications as they undermine the fundamental values of the EU and, like in the past, extend beyond the Union borders.

Halting and reversing the democratic backsliding in Central Europe will depend, among others, on the ability of EU institutions and member states to defend European values in the region. In this case, a great responsibility lies on Germany which, from all member states, benefited from 1989 and 2004 the most. It became the key partner of Central Europe in social, economic, and cultural areas. However, it may turn out that Germany's engagement will be insufficient, which means the support of other large EU members involved in the region (particularly France) will also be needed to define the future of Central Europe.

Global and continental context

The political transformation of Central Europe in 1989 was a part of a broader "third wave" of democratisation. Before getting over the Iron Curtain this wave had first swept through Southern Europe, Latin America, and East Asia. It was yet stopped short in China at the Tiananmen Square but then reached out into Africa. The central focus in many of these transitions included the de-radicalisation of

communist or pro-communist political forces and introduction of free market reforms. The democratization which then started taking place in different parts of the world also influenced Central Europe in 1989. For instance, a new template for accommodation was proposed to the communists, namely a negotiated transition in the form of round tables. This format was pioneered in post-Francoist Spain where it became known as consenso.

Nevertheless, the revolutions of 1989 were a real watershed. Illustratively, the Freedom House rankings estimated that in that year the democratization reached an exceptional level and was achieved at the fastest pace in the modern history. As a result, the Freedom House recognized that while in 1989 as many as 37% of the world's states and territories were not free, their number decreased to 20% in 1992. It was the lowest level in modern history.

On the other hand, the model of transition of Central Europe, which assumed the process of democratization intertwined with free-market reforms supported by the West on the basis of conditionality, was used around the world. As James Mark, Bogdan C. Iacob, Tobias Rupprecht and Ljubica Spaskovska underline in their book 1989: *A Global History of Eastern Europe*: "For many Western Europeans, US leaders, and also newly 'Westernised' East European political elites, [..] West's international role was framed as the reproduction of this foundational end of Cold War moment that had supposedly finally revealed the natural convergence of market and liberal democracy."

For these reasons, since the mid-2000s the transition of 1989-2004 in Central Europe has been presented by the EU and the US as a model to follow, particularly by the countries in Western Balkans, Eastern Europe and South Caucasus. The idea of using the legacy of transformation of Central Europe as a model for non-

Former Czech president Václav Havel at his summer residence in Trutnov in 2007 wearing a T-shirt supporting the Belarusian democratic opposition. Source: Shutterstock

European countries gained popularity also during the Arab Spring (2010-2012).

It is important to keep in mind that in addition to changing Central Europe and the post-Soviet space, the Autumn of Nations also reshaped, to a certain degree, the West. The collapse of centralized and planned socialist economy in Central Europe provided liberal politicians and economists in the West with arguments that supported further deregulation of their own economies. The so-called Washington Consensus, which assumed liberalisation of monetary and economic policies, prevailed worldwide.

However, the failure of the Arab Spring and especially in the face of the rise of authoritarian tendencies, far-right parties and radicalization of "traditional" right-wing political forces across the world, also in Europe, had an effect on the legacy of the changes that took place in both 1989 and 2004. These abovementioned negative tendencies were confirmed by the Freedom House rankings which showed the rise of non-free countries and territories from 20% in 1992 to almost 30% in 2021.

Matter-of-factly, Central Europe became the region in the EU where these negative tendencies achieved the highest levels. This is especially true for Hungary, but also (although to a smaller degree) Poland. Specifically, the governments of these two states not only introduced illiberal policies at home, but also internationally started to co-operate with the governments (Trump administration in the US, Bolsonaro's government in Brazil,) that contested liberal democracy or turned into authoritarian regimes, as was the case with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey. Also importantly, Hungary intensified its relations with China and established a close relationship with Putin's Russia.

Paradoxically, Hungary, and to a lesser degree also Poland, became à rebours a source of inspiration for various nationalistic and semi-authoritarian political forces in Western Balkans and Eastern Europe. The best exemplification of this phenomenon is Viktor Orbán's close cooperation with nationalistic forces in Serbia as well as Bosnia and Hercegovina (Republika Srpska) and North Macedonia. It can be even stated that the negative developments in Hungary and Poland have contributed to a rather low support for further EU enlargement in some Western European countries.

Without a doubt, the year 1989 was strongly shaped by the outcome of the Cold War, namely the victory of the US and NATO over the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact which were both dissolved in 1991. These two events also turned the region of Central Europe into the main playground in global politics. As such it existed in the transition period from the bi-polar world dominated by the rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union into a unipolar world, which in turn saw the dominance of the US for almost two decades. During that time, the process of Central Europe's integration with the EU also strengthened US's influence within the European

Union, mainly because Poland, but also to a lesser degree Czechia and Hungary, held a strongly pro-American position in their foreign policies. Yet, today we can see some serious, unprecedented in fact, tensions between Hungary and, to a smaller degree Poland, and the current Biden administration in the US. There is no doubt that these tensions are a result of the democratic backsliding that have been observed in both countries.

The emergence of the multipolar world which the analysts of international relations claim to have been taking place since the 2008 global economic crisis found its place also in Central Europe. This is especially visible in the behaviour of such players as China which is now trying to gain influence in the region but also Russia that is trying to regain at least some of its former influence, particularly through energy and military blackmail. Beijing's rising interest in Central Europe can be explained by the fact that the countries in the region are members of the EU, the region is characterised by dynamic economic development and strong integration with Germany, which is China's main economic partner. However, the Chinese engagement still encounters some obstacles, as it was in the case of Czechia, whose new government has showed a high level of criticism towards China's internal and foreign policy.

Central Europe in the EU

After 1989 Central European states, with the exception of Slovakia, have managed to quickly establish functioning democracies, even though it took place with some shortcomings. Slovakia's authoritarian slide was yet stopped in 1998 and democracy was rapidly re-established. Unfortunately, the process of political convergence of Central Europe with the rest of the EU has started to reverse in recent years, particularly in Hungary and Poland. Hungary under Victor Orbán has witnessed an exceptional democratic backsliding since the elections of 2010. As a result of the changes that have taken place in the country since then the Freedom House moved Hungary from the category of "free" to "partly free" countries. It is placed in this category as the only EU member state. It is also probable that should Orbán win again in April 2022 elections, the authoritarian slide will only accelerate. As stated earlier Orbán's Hungary started to serve as an important source of inspiration for many right-wing politicians in Europe, including those in the Western parts of the continent. Polish authorities are also showing that they had been inspired by the Hungarian model, which means that if nothing gets changed in the country, Poland too might transform itself into a partly free state. Quite symptomatic in this regard is the fact that the process of de-democratization both in Hungary and Poland as well as the rise of Eurosceptic, authoritarian populist and nationalistic political forces in the region was closely accompanied by a critical evaluation, sometimes even rejection, of the legacy of 1989 and

2004. These two events started to get portrayed as a capture of state power by cosmopolitan, liberal and post-communist elites who gave away national and economic sovereignty to the EU, Germany and multinational companies.

A banner presented during celebrations of the Labour Day in Prague in 2017. It illustrates democracy as a leaf bitten by caterpillars with names: Putin (Russia), Kaczyński (Poland), Orbán (Hungary), Babiš (Czechia), Trump (US) and Fico (Slovakia). Source: Shutterstock

It is quite clear that the negative developments in Hungary and Poland have been undermining fundamental values of the EU and the primacy of the EU law on an unprecedented scale. In response, the EU institutions, and most member states, although inconsistently, reacted to them by undertaking at times exceptional steps. These include: resolutions passed by the European Parliament, rulings of the Court of Justice of the European Union and the European Court of Human Rights, article seven procedures, mechanism of conditionality concerning the EU's budget, the rule of law reports issued by the European Commission. Despite these steps, it is justified to agree with Laurent Pech, Patryk Wachowiec and Dariusz Mazur who argue that "*the Commission has systematically acted in a too little too late fashion while the Council has systematically failed to meaningfully act, with the inaction of these two EU institutions amounting, at times, to dereliction of duties. By contrast, the Court of Justice has forcefully defended judicial independence*." In addition, despite some serious differences in the area of foreign policy, especially in regards to Russia, Poland and Hungary have established a close alliance against EU institutions and most of its member states.

A relatively high level of corruption in Central Europe is another factor that limits its states convergence with Western Europe. This issue is also, to a large degree, correlated with the deficits of the democratic system in the region. That is why, according to Transparency International Central Europe is the second most corrupted region in the EU, after the Western Balkans. According to the Corruption Perception Index powered by Transparency International just before the accession

to the EU Central Europe recorded a high level of corruption, similar to the one currently recorded in Western Balkans. Indeed, Hungary has experienced a unique rise of corruption and together with Bulgaria it is regarded as the most corrupt EU member state. At the same time, the Baltic states have managed to surpass Central Europe in their successful fight against corruption. The rule of law has substantially improved since 2004 but stagnated, or deteriorated, in recent years. The free-market reforms launched after the fall of communism and the accession to the EU resulted in a spectacular pace of economic growth of Central Europe and its catching up with the western part of the continent. For instance, Poland's GDP measured in purchasing power parity (PPP) increased almost 5.5 times between 1989 and 2021. Today, Czechia's GDP per capita is slightly higher than Spain's and will soon surpass the one that is recorded in Italy. Hungary's economy is also regarded as stronger than Portugal's and much stronger than that of Greece. Yet, the region's economic convergence with the rest of the EU stagnated mainly because Slovakia was the only state that adopted the euro. The accession of Poland, Czechia, and Hungary to the eurozone remains highly unlikely in a medium-term perspective. As a result, Central Europe has been lagging behind the Baltic states (but also Slovenia) which is already in the eurozone and has even been surpassed by Bulgaria and Croatia which entered ERM II, which is the so-called waiting room to the Eurozone.

From a long-term perspective, a relatively low level of innovation is recorded in most Central European countries, which is another serious challenge to their further economic convergence with Western Europe. In addition, a high level of excess deaths recorded in the countries of Central Europe during the current Covid-19 pandemic brutally displayed a huge gap between the western and central parts of the continent. According to the Economist data, excess death per 100 thousand people in Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Czechia is approximately three times higher than what is recorded for France and Germany. Meanwhile in comparison with Southern Europe (Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece) the death toll in Central Europe is almost twice as high.

Impact on the EU and Germany

The democratic revolutions which took place in 1989 and the EU enlargement to the East that happened in 2004 had also a very significant impact on the EU. Not only, did the fall of communism in Central Europe start the process of integration of the entire region of Central Europe with the European Economic Community, but also the perspective of their accession accelerated its internal integration. This resulted in the transformation of the European Economic Community into the European Union in 1992 and the establishment of the common currency by 2000. Even more, the fall of communism and the perspective of the integration

with the EU stimulated development of regional cooperation in Central Europe on an unprecedented scale.

The establishment of the Visegrád Group (V4) gathering Poland, Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary is just one of the illustrations of this cooperation. This group started to play a relatively significant role in the EU even though it has never managed to overcome substantial divergence of interests of its member states. In fact, differences between the Visegrád countries have further increased due to the democratic backsliding in Poland and Hungary. To the point that many experts now talk more about V2+2, in other words: Czechia and Slovakia vs. Hungary and Poland.

In order to counter the EU's liberal mainstream, Poland and Hungary have tried to establish cooperation between "soft" Eurosceptic and far right forces, also from the countries of Western and Southern Europe. Evidently, the illiberal trends are not limited to the region of Central Europe and are also on the rise in most EU states. For the latter, Hungary and Poland now even serve as a role model. For instance, the "traditional" sovereigntist right in France endorsed the unconstitutional verdict of the Polish Constitutional Tribunal undermining the primacy of the EU law. It is thus justified to say that the future integration of radical right on the EU level will largely depend on the ability of Poland and Hungary to become the engines of this process. The importance of Poland and Hungary in this regard is explained by the fact that only in these two countries the governments are dominated by "moderate" far-right parties.

Democratization of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, which started in 1989 and spilled over into East Germany, contributed also to the reunification of the German state which took place in 1990. The latter one was in fact the first enlargement of the European community into the East. The reunification of Germany and the accession of Central European states which took place in 2004 decisively changed the balance of power within the EU in favour of Germany. This has been especially true in the area of the economy where Germany is unquestionably the largest player.

Overall, the economic cooperation between Central European states and Germany has been mutually profitable and contributed to development in all of the involved states. For Germany the greatest benefit was the expansion of its industry in the region which became the main engine of the country's economic growth. As a result, Berlin has gained the position of the most powerful player in the EU. While in 2004 the share of Central European countries trade with Germany did not exceed 10%, it reached 15% in 2021. This number shows that right now the volume of trade between Germany and Central European states is just slightly smaller than the combined exchange between Germany, France, Italy, and Spain.

Volkswagen Foundry in Poznań. With a tonnage of 30,000 it is the second largest foundry in Volkswagen AG and one of the biggest facilities of this type in Europe. Nearly 30% of vehicles manufactured by Volkswagen AG are equipped with cylinder heads manufactured in Poznań.
Source: Shutterstock

In fact, the level of the economic integration between Germany and Central Europe is even larger because of Austria's engagement in the region. The Austrian and German economies are interconnected to a degree that has been unprecedented in the EU. However, while looking at the path and decisions of Central European economies, we may say that they too are pursuing Austria's path. However, Germany's robust economic ties with the region also had a negative side effect. Namely, the economic calculations caused a rather restrained reaction of the German government to the dismantling of the rule of law in Hungary and Poland. A close political cooperation between the CDU-CSU parties with Orbán 's Fidesz until 2019 represented another handicap. Finally, a difficult legacy of the Second World War has also influenced the current Polish-German relations.

What's next?

All said, the future of Central Europe's convergence with Western Europe will largely depend on the level of institutional integration of the region with the EU as well as the political developments, which is the case of Poland and Hungary. Both are strongly intertwined. According to the 2004 accession treaties, Central European countries are obliged to adopt the common European currency. However, at the moment only the majority of the Hungarian society support the accession of their country to the Eurozone, while Poles and Czechs are against it. Possibly, the continuation of EU's internal integration around the Eurozone combined with Bulgaria's and Croatia's accession to it will increase the popularity of the European currency also in Central Europe. A mass campaign for the adaption of euro carried out by the civil society and pro-European political forces, but also

supported by the EU, may also influence public opinion. An idea of the fulfilment of the 2004 dreams could serve as a key motif of such a campaign. Nevertheless, the further dismantling of rule of law in Hungary and Poland will remain the main stumbling block for the integration of both countries with the Eurozone. Needless to say, Czechia and Slovakia are also not entirely immune from the democratic backsliding. Even if in a mild form, it may affect them in the coming years.

The negative scenarios concerning Hungary and Poland will not have only a regional dimension but also a European one. There is no doubt that fundamental European values are currently at stake in the region. Meanwhile, the EU cannot survive in the longer term if acquis communautaire is not being obeyed by its member states. For this reason, the EU has to increase its institutional and financial support to the civil society and independent media in Central Europe. The current financial resources allocated to these two areas, although increased in recent years, are still insufficient. Moreover, the EU must assure the implementation by Hungary and Poland of CJEU fundamental rulings on the rule of law in both countries.

Also, it needs to be stressed that a special responsibility lies on Germany which is the main EU state with unprecedently strong economic, cultural, political and social ties with Central Europe. However, as it has already been argued here, also Germany's position has some serious constrains. This means that other EU member states, especially France, should become more vocal and assertive in regards to the developments in the region. France, right after Germany, possesses the largest assets in Central Europe. Its share in trade with countries of the region exceeds 5%, while the French firms occupy top places on the list of foreign investors. However, the French engagement also requires a serious rethinking. France's policy in Central Europe is often characterized by passiveness or quasi-appeasement as it was evidenced by President Emmanuel Macron's visit to Hungary.

The combining of external and internal pressure is the key precondition for the prevention of further democratic backsliding of Poland and Hungary. If at some point, the ruling elites in these two states, facing the loss of their popularity and weakening of their control of the state, reluctantly accept a reconciliation process with the political opposition and civil society, the legacy of 1989, which includes dialogue, round tables and peaceful transfer of power, may again serve as an important source of inspiration for their return to liberal democracy.

Adam Balcer is Programme Director at the Jan Nowak-Jeziorański College of Eastern Europe and Senior Fellow at WiseEuropa. He also cooperates as a national researcher with the European Council of Foreign Relations and teaches at the Centre for Eastern European Studies at the University of Warsaw.

Hungary at the crossroads:

challenges of democratic backslide and Euroscepticism

István Hegedűs

Both the transition from dictatorship to democracy in 1988-91 and the EU accession in Hungary in 2004 should be regarded immensely positively. Still, as the Hungarian case shows, a greater self-reflection of the liberal (former) elite should become part of the learning process in order to face current illiberal and populist practices in the Central European region adequately.

Most of the participating observers and political actors assess the balance of the historic development in 1988-91, hence, the transition from dictatorship to democracy in the countries of the former communist bloc, in immensely positive terms. Regime-changes meant a liberating breaking point in the lives of (partly newly born) states, nations, ethnic and minority groups, civil organisations and citizens following the dark period of authoritarian rule and a forced isolation from Western "bourgeois influence" in the official public spheres. Fresh hopes emerged in societies for a brighter future where political and economic freedoms can be enjoyed and exercised by each member of the political community. The miracle of 1989, the unstoppable wave of the collapse of one-party systems implicated the historic victory of liberal, democratic ideas: reforms, revolutions and mixed "refolutions", as contemporary public intellectual Timothy Garton Ash invented the expression. They finally brought an end to communism everywhere in Europe and even contributed to the dissolution of the Marxist-Leninist superpower, the Soviet Union.
The transformation of closed societies and bureaucratically controlled economies to democratically legitimised institutional systems, as well as to the dominance of free market mechanisms logically resulted in the accession of new democracies of the Central European region to the European Union in 2004. The desire for the "re-unification" of Europe – the efforts of the former Eastern bloc countries to join the "West" – turned out to be the new reality. In the eyes of the protagonists of a united Europe, EU membership is seen as a success story, eighteen years later. Namely, following the "Big Bang" enlargement of the European Union, all the new Member States have clearly benefited from the economic advantages of the single market and the transfers deriving from numerous funds of the European budget – whilst at the same time they have gained equal status to the older members of the continent's exclusive club.

Ambivalent public sentiments and political-ideological differentiation

Even liberal democrats have to admit that fundamental changes happened in parallel with political and economic shocks, high social costs and individual hardships. As early as in the 1990s, popular counter-narratives emerged offering a gloomy, even hostile, description of the historic transformation. Citizens' discontent and distrust towards politicians and public institutions have grown, whilst civil society activism stagnated at a relatively low level. Political cleavages

have become stronger and the polarisation gave space to radicalism especially on the right-side of the political spectrum. Strikingly, ambivalent attitudes towards the "turbulent" years which followed the regime-change can be observed even in the political rhetoric of today's democratic political opposition in Hungary.

As for the attitude towards the European Union, nationalistic and anti-European views gained dominant government positions in the second decade of our century, first in Hungary, then in Poland. Although critical opinions regarding the European orientation of major elite-groups had spread over in vague and embryonic forms much earlier, those were the nationalistic populist parties which structured an amorphous protest mood into systematic and mobilising Eurosceptic ideological constructions as part of their updated political profiles. Current assaults against the assumed colonisation of Hungary by "Brussels" and its bureaucracy – this simplistic term even includes elected Members of the European Parliament – have gained support amongst traditional conservative voters with the help of centrally orchestrated "sovereigntist", nativist political messages and propaganda campaigns. Under the façade of the so-called freedom fight and a cultural anti-revolution it was proclaimed as a Central European regional response. As its result, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán deconstructed the liberal constitutional order, step by step, at the national level, and to top it all, within the European Union.

Thousands demonstrated in central Budapest in 2017 against a legislation on higher education that was seen as targeting the Central European University. This academic institution was founded in 1991 by George Soros, a Hungarian-American political billionaire and philanthropist of Jewish origin. In 2019 the university ceased its operations in Budapest and relocated to Vienna. Source: Shutterstock

A (non-linear) process of gradual negative shift in the public perceptions and a U-turn in the political-partisan arena concerning the regime-change and the ruling party's relationship with the European Union, stems from a general disillusionment of huge parts of population right after the disintegration of the well-known (local and national) communist order. This sentiment has been strengthened not only because of the unavoidable economic fall-back which was the result of the necessary and often painful transformation of the national economy, but also as a consequence of the sharp conflicts within the framework of political pluralism and tense party competition – instead of the desired "national unity". Also, the elite-driven intellectual-cultural debates seemed especially far away from the everyday concerns of most citizens. As a result, there was a strong feeling among people that the new parties were only pursuing their own interests and political agenda and not serving their voters. Secondly, the misunderstanding of the peaceful and negotiated character of the transition period helped the creation of conspiracy theories about a "secret agreement" that secured an "elite-change" instead of a real regime-change, whilst post-communists could even preserve their crucial social and political influence. Thirdly, in contrast to the previous assumption, political and economic failures – as well as poor public communication – made by an inexperienced, new political guard in governing positions brought back nostalgia towards a relatively secure political system of the former "soft" communist dictatorship (under János Kádár). Later on, a sharpening logic of partisan blocs, tribalisation and polarisation re-organised the supporters of left-liberal versus the right-wing political opinion-holders into two hostile camps making any public dialogue practically impossible: be it about the past or about the future.

Hungary's membership in the European Union enjoyed an overwhelming social support in the beginning. Nevertheless, the idealistic, value-based aspects of this project have gradually evaporated, and utilitarian considerations have taken over in the public discourse. The very essence of the European idea and its history, the ways and means of the internal decision-making processes, the multi-level structures that include supranational institutions as well as the primacy of the European legal system have never been part of any top-down educational efforts in Hungarian schools. Instead, a simplistic cost and benefit analysis gained ground and an advanced suspicious notice about potential losers of Hungary's accession was made. By the end of the last century, the style of the average media coverage moved to a sort of Euro-pessimistic approach that expressed the inferiority feelings of a relatively small nation and the fears of its people about the uncertain consequences of EU membership. A new dominant view has emerged about the hypocrisy of the big Member States which only gave lip-service to the candidate countries but did not want to let them in at all. The annual progress reports published by the European Commission started to get interpreted as a

sign of an unpleasant teacher-student relationship. Although there was no strong anti-EU resistance movement in the country, the atmosphere on the day of the national referendum expressed the "yes, but" feelings of citizens in favour of the accession. By 2004, the ostensible national consent among political parties evaporated, too. The rhetoric of Fidesz, then once again in opposition, moved far away from its original liberal Euro-enthusiasm and Orbán proclaimed that EU membership was just a marriage of convenience.

This new platform was the basis of crystallising Eurosceptic, even anti-European, stance that has been openly developed after Fidesz grasped political power with a two-third parliamentarian majority in 2010 following a political earthquake which confirmed a strong move towards the right. This "revolution at the ballots" gave Orbán an excuse to dismantle the Hungarian constitutional order, introduce restrictive legislation in several policy areas, concentrate government's influence over the media, undermine the rule of law, academic freedom and so on. The self-consciously proclaimed "illiberal state" seemed to be a unique "laboratory" experiment for a while. The reactions of the European institutions, top political actors from the Member States remained yet hesitant, chaotic and expressed a "wait and see" strategy and inertia. Whilst the left-wing parties and the liberals criticised Orbán and his new type of political regime, the centre-right European political family, the European People's Party, defended him for about a decade. This discipline was based on the misconception about the real intentions of the Hungarian leader, the misjudgement of his personal character and a false interpretation of the interests of the European centre-right. These miscalculations made it possible for Orbán to portray his critics as liberal-left conspirators inspired by Western arrogance who use double standards against his country. Although the protection shield of the biggest political group in the European Parliament was broken in 2021, the rupture took place too late to block the illiberal laws and government measures that Fidesz had introduced at the national level so far. Since the secession of his organisation from the European People's Party, Orbán has been trying to bring together all kinds of anti-liberal radical right-wing European political forces under one umbrella.

What went wrong and what is to be done?

These are not easy questions to be answered. There is a strong temptation – especially in the younger generations – to blame all kinds of political actors who played important roles in politics and public lives during the last decades, sometimes regardless of their real motivations, objectives, successes and failures. The judgement of the posterity will not be a uniform statement, either. Still, whilst some of the charges have no serious grounds, critical thinking, including the self-reflection of liberal-minded (former) elite, should be part of the learning process in order to face current and future political dilemmas and public choices.

First of all, peaceful revolutions did not occur behind closed "smoky" doors. The "masses" – both in the cities and in the countryside – actively participated in demonstrations, referenda, and elections during the transition period – although to varying degrees – in all countries of the region where representatives of the old regime gradually lost their ruling positions. In Hungary, for example, about two hundred thousand people were present at the reburial of the executed Prime Minister of the 1956 revolution, Imre Nagy on June 16th 1989, and more than 90% of the citizens voted – at a high turn-out – for dissolving the communist Workers Guard in a referendum held five months later. Secondly, economic transformation occurred with different methodology, speed and social costs in every country, but the outcome, a functioning market economy with foreign investment was similar.

The monument of the former communist Prime Minister Imre Nagy, the hero of the 1956 revolution, looking towards the Hungary Parliament. Nagy's reburial in 1989 gathered a crowd of 250,000 and is regarded as a catalyst for Victor Orbán's political career. The statute was unveiled in 1996, one day before the 100th anniversary of Nagy's birth. In 2019 the statute was relocated to another place by the decision of Orbán's government, which caused protests among Hungarian liberal and left-wing opposition. In place of the statue, a reproduction of the interwar National Martyr's Memorial was erected, commemorating the victims of the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919. Source: Shutterstock

Today's retrospective debates about a potential different approach to the liberal orthodoxy of the post-1989 era, which should have focused more on social policy issues and growing social differences, might have an important point. Nevertheless, the most successful countries, including Hungary, needed a decade to re-organise their economies into competitive, open and attractive structures whilst reaching their previous peak regarding production level. The human costs of the transformation might have been neglected by some leading market fundamentalists, but in general, it was the low economic performance that constrained government interventions and a generous public financing of a stronger and more efficient welfare state.

Still, different social strata, especially the lower middle-class and the whole underclass, have gotten convinced that nobody represents their interests. Here we are faced with the much-discussed dilemma, whether the rise of populism in the 21st century can be explained first of all by economic or cultural factors? This problem is a puzzle not only for the researchers dealing with the region of Central Europe. Should the new anti-communist elites have paid more attention to national sentiments? Whilst some liberal and left-wing politicians had difficulties to incorporate patriotism into their political language, national conservative parties established after 1989 and active in the new democratic political arena – often in government position – started a bidding war even using the toxic rhetoric of ethnic-national exclusion: we could see that it could bring tragic consequences as it was the case of the former Yugoslavia.

Equally, it would be one-sided to put all the blame for the current democratic backslide in Hungary and Poland as well as for disillusionment in the former communist countries on the failures and mistakes made by the left and liberal elites. In fact, ambivalent public sentiments have been smartly misused and exacerbated by political entrepreneurs who have moved towards radical views. No matter what mistakes the left and liberal political parties, intellectuals, opinion-leaders and civil society leaders might have made in the past, we cannot compare them and the wrong choices they might have also made to the conscious manoeuvres by Viktor Orbán who has undermined liberal democracy in Hungary and who has attacked the concept of a united Europe – and the liberal world order – in more than last ten years.

Viktor Orbán, Prime Minister of Hungary, at a press conference with Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation. Both politicians have met 12 times since 2010. No EU leader has met so many times with Putin. The last visit of Orbán to Moscow took place in early of February 2022, in the middle of the serious tension around Ukraine's security. During this meeting president Putin "endorsed" president Orbán before April 2022 elections, saying: "As we usually say when our partners are having elections, we will work with any elected leader. But I must note that you have done much in your work on the Russian track in both the interests of Hungary and Russia. I hope our cooperation will continue." Source: www.kremlin.ru

This fundamental difference does not mean that democratic and pro-European political actors, parties and movements can simply relax without any self-reflection: they have to rethink their attitudes, opinions, programmes and political styles in Central Europe, within the European Union and globally. The gap between the elite and ordinary citizens should be tightened, social injustices need to be reduced, new ways and means of political representation and direct involvement into public affairs are supposed to be invented, a conscious shift in economic and social policies have to be on their agenda, including green transformation and digital revolution, as well as efforts to mitigate the negative impacts of social-political polarisation, tribalism and atomisation should take place. The public discourse should become vivid in the area of ideas, both in rational and emotional terms, whilst fighting against disinformation and fake news should become a priority in a complicated media environment.

Conclusions

Evidently, a complex project for social and economic renewal in Hungary and other Central European countries has to come hand in hand with a courageous political strategy which undertakes unavoidable, but peaceful, law-based confrontation with the enemies of liberal democracy. This struggle cannot and will not remain simply the problem of the Eastern part of the European Union. The European institutions have drawn some final conclusions after years of sclerotic reactions to the threats coming from inside the European political space. Seemingly, there is a genuine will in the EU to use the new toolbox which was invented in December 2020 at the approval of the Recovery and Resilience Facility by the European Council. The linkage of financial transfers to conditionality mechanisms demands respect of the rule of law and the abolition of state-led corruption. The endorsement of this idea shows that many European leaders have come to an understanding that the spreading virus of illiberalism and authoritarian populism have really challenged the entire value-based system of the European community. As a result, the two misbehaving Member States, Poland and Hungary, or better to say; their governments, are now facing stronger pressure than ever before.

Although a right-wing "Populist International" has not been founded yet, the odds for the birth of a strong anti-European partisan bloc are relatively high. It is thus important to realise that the political formations which want to undermine the European Union, at least in its present settings, enjoy a considerable public support also outside Poland and Hungary. The current ideological-political cleavage does not express an East-West divide: the frontlines can be found – in different scales – within the societies and political blocks of all Member States of the European Union. Actually, in most of the former post-communist countries there are pro-European democrats in government positions, including the Czech

Republic, Slovakia, the Baltic states, Romania, and Bulgaria. What is equally worth to mention: neither Hungary, nor Poland have been fully "Orbanised". As for the European Union, public surveys show that in both countries in a vast majority the citizens still support membership of their countries in EU structures.
In Hungary a united domestic political opposition has more chances to overcome Orbán's political machinery by winning the elections in 2022. It would be a huge misunderstanding and an underestimation of democratic-liberal alternatives to give up faith in reaching new political crossroads sooner or later. The future of Central Europe does not have to be necessarily illiberal just because of an assumed historic determinism or cultural factors. Just the opposite: we have all hopes to believe that in 2022 even Hungary can find its route back to the original historic track that was so miraculously established during the recent two wonderful historic events: the regime-change in 1989 and the accession of our state to the European Union in 2004.

István Hegedűs is the chairman of the Hungarian Europe Society, a Budapest-based NGO. In 1989 he participated in the national roundtable negotiations on the transition to democracy as a delegate of the opposition groups. He became a liberal member of the first free elected Hungarian Parliament in 1990 and served as the vice-chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

The history of post-communism in a nutshell:

Czechia after 1989

Michal Klíma

The transition to democracy in Central Europe, including Czechia after 1989 was a challenging social manoeuvre. It contained within itself deeply contradictory impulses.

After 1989 the world was gripped by a spirit of euphoria. An irresistible, irreversible and thus also natural transition from communist totalitarianism to democracy was eagerly expected. Francis Fukuyama wrote of the "end of history". Today, in 2021, we know that no linear development to happier tomorrows could ever get materialised. With only few exceptions, dictatorship and authoritarian regimes entrenched themselves or returned to the post-Soviet countries. But even in the region of Central Europe, the foundations of democracy are now being undermined. This is attested to by the developments in Victor Orbán's Hungary and partially also in Jarosław Kaczyński's Poland.

In the Czech Republic there are also fears of an erosion of democracy. Since the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2017 and 2018, political players who prefer an orientation towards authoritarian superpowers of Russia and China have strengthened their position. These politicians make no secret that once an opportunity emerges, they would dismantle the institutional pillars of democracy. In the first place it will be independence of the public media and the autonomy of the public prosecution service.

Indeed, 32 years after the fall of totalitarian communism, democracy is once again threatened in the region. On the one hand, the post-communist era secured basic human rights and freedoms for its citizens within the conditions of pluralistic relations in the economy and politics. On the other hand, it was accompanied by the advance of clientelism, corruption and organised crime, which culminated in the phenomenon of "party capture", followed by "state capture". The result was a distrust towards the established party elite, followed by the establishment of new political parties and above all the advent of authoritarian tendencies.

A post-communist Eldorado

In the transition to democracy the main emphasis was initially placed on the establishment of formal institutions. At the centre of attention were political parties on a left-to-right axis, electoral rules, fundamental parameters of the parliamentary form of government, and a system of checks and balances. It is undeniable that these institutional elements were of key importance for the stability of democracy. Nevertheless, the weight of historical and cultural legacy of more than 40 years of communist totalitarianism was underestimated. In particular, insufficient regard was paid to the dimension of informal relationships behind the scenes of official politics.

The fact is that after 1989 predatory structures left over from the communist period remained here, while there was an absence of the rule of law, a functioning

administration and civil society. The unique political and economic transformation as well as the break-up of Czechoslovakia provided an unrepeatable opportunity, a kind of "historical window" for the accession of those who at the turn of the 1990s had access to financial, social and secret service capital.

Appearing on the starting line were diverse clusters of actors from the influential ranks of the late "real socialism" of the 1980s. These featured groups from the informal economic sector or criminal circles. They also included privileged professions with clientelist potential and figures from the secret services.

The new "gold diggers" could not fail to take advantage of this historic opportunity. Within the conditions of the breakdown of totalitarianism, the initial absence of legal regulations, they began to form mutual interconnections and create an informal network of relationships. In the initial phase of accumulation of capital, which can be termed the post-communist Eldorado, hidden structures of clientelism, corruption of organised crime were thus established.

This influential sector of the grey and black economy, referred to summarily as "non-transparent business", needed security and political coverage to ensure its profits. As a result, it penetrated primarily into political parties, and via this means into the constituent institutions of the parliamentary form of government. Non-transparent business gave birth to non-transparent politics. And vice versa: corrupt politics gave privilege to corrupt business. The aim was to act together as "parasites" upon the privatisation of the immense state assets, as well as on public tenders and later also European funds.

Phase 1: The 1990s and organised crime

At the beginning there could have been no greater contrast between the universal enthusiasm surrounding Czech society's newly acquired freedom and the stark reality of the advent of the aforementioned privileged, predatory groups. The investigative journalist Josef Klíma characterised the first post-communist decade as the era of the "Wild West", when he stated the following: "Suddenly it was as if the old police were keeping a low profile because of their bad reputation, Václav Havel's amnesty had released 23 thousand criminals without any safety net, and now new, predatory individuals were appearing here, who immediately sensed an opportunity and who faced no legal obstacles. And the result was that the 1990s were full of violence and murders."

Phase 2: Clientelism and corruption

The 2000s and 2010s in the Czech Republic were marked by deformations of democracy and the rule of law. Although organised crime was in retreat at that time, hidden and "parasitic" groups in business and politics based on personal ties increasingly asserted themselves. The newly established informal networks,

interconnecting non-transparent business with municipal, regional and nationwide levels of political parties were controlled by notorious bosses and "godfathers". In the two largest governing parties they were aided in this by the organised hiring of hundreds and thousands of fake party members, at least until 2014.

Between 1990 and 2010 the two main political parties, namely the right-wing ODS (Civic Democratic Party) and the left-wing ČSSD (Czech Social Democratic Party), were more or less colonised in this manner, and together with them their smaller coalition parties, the KDU-ČSL (Christian Democratic Union), ODA (Civic Democratic Alliance) and Unie svobody (Freedom Union). The collective share of the vote of the ODS and ČSSD fell from 68 % in 2006 to 18.5 % in 2017.

Nonetheless, the ODS and ČSSD were not merely passive objects, but actively contributed to the formation of systemic clientelism and corruption. In the case of the ODS this took place especially under the leaderships of Václav Klaus and Mirek Topolánek, and in the case of the ČSSD under Miloš Zeman, Stanislav Gross and Jiří Paroubek. The preservation of this state of affairs was also supported by their cartel agreements on common government, both on a nationwide level through the so-called opposition agreement (1998-2002) between the ČSSD and the ODS, and on the regional and municipal levels.

Václav Klaus, Prime Minister of Czechia (1993-1998), President of the Chamber of Deputies (1998-2002) and President of Czechia (2003-2013) standing together with Miloš Zeman, President of the Chamber of Deputies (1996-1998), Prime Minister (1998-2002) and the President of Czechia (since 2013). Source: Shutterstock

The process of partial colonisation of parties by informal business groups, represented by bosses and godfathers, led to a systematic drainage of the public resources of cities, regions and the state. With the aid of collaborating party elites, corrupt business penetrated into parliament, government and the civil service, with the aim of capturing the state, as well as regional and municipal politics with local firms. Behind the facade of democracy, a kleptocracy asserted itself, thus a process of decentralised state capture.

The phenomenon of "state capture" was described at the end of the 1990s by the World Bank economists, after they had analysed some serious defects within the post-communist states in the transition to a market economy. Joe Hellman and David Kaufmann uncovered how a small group of large companies had been corrupting and using other dubious practices to influence the decision-making of the key actors, meaning political parties, members of parliament, government officials, judges and members of central banks.

They secured with the aid of "large-scale legal corruption", the passing of rules and laws which guaranteed them a privileged market position, and therefore exclusive profits and impunity. The result was a deformed market, in which a dominant role was played by monopolies and oligopolies, forcing out domestic and foreign competition in certain sectors of the economy.

Within the context of the similar developments occurring in Czechia, there was a massive loss of trust among citizens with regard to the political establishment, especially the ruling parties (ODS and ČSSD). From 2010 onwards, a range of new political parties and movements emerged alongside traditional subjects. The 2017 parliamentary elections saw strong performances by ANO (Alliance of Dissatisfied Citizens), the Pirate Party, SPD (Freedom and Direct Democracy) and STAN (Mayors and Independents), who altogether gained 56% of the vote. The ANO movement, with almost 30% of the vote, gained the dominant position in the coalition government, including the post of Prime Minister for its businessman founder Andrej Babiš.

Phase 3: Oligarchical and authoritarian tendencies

The situation qualitatively changed in the third post-revolutionary decade, when Babiš, one of the most powerful businessmen in the country, decided not to operate in politics by means of traditional parties but rather enter the political arena directly with his own private party, supported by its own security division and its own media. The resulting concentration of political, economic, media and security power makes it appropriate to designate Babiš as an oligarch who objectively threatened the system of checks and balances in politics.

Andrej Babiš founded the ANO movement in 2011 as a private business-firm party, the political division of his Agrofert holding. For this purpose, before parliamentary elections in 2013, he acquired a media division. Specifically, he purchased the Mafra company, which owned two nationwide daily newspapers and internet portals, as well as an influential radio station. In 2018 he extended his media ownership with the purchase of the Bauer Media press, covering 30 leisure and lifestyle magazines targeted mainly at women.

In total, this made up the business, political and media empire of one man, who held the post of the Prime Minister and at one time controlled almost 40% of parliamentary mandates. Meanwhile the conglomerate Agrofert, which he owns, currently held in his trust funds, covers more than 200 firms. Furthermore, it incorporates a security division with the potential to gather strategic information on his competitors.

The logo of AGROFERT, a.s. on the building of its headquarters in Prague's Chodov district. Source: Shutterstock

In summary, between 2017 and 2021 we were witnessing a concentration of power and conflict of interests that has no parallel anywhere in the democratic world. The only exception is the Italian oligarch Silvio Berlusconi, who serves as a certain role model for Babiš and who succeeded with his business-firm party Forza Italia in the 1990s. This moment marked the collapse of the Italian First Republic, which had been exacerbated by clientelism, corruption and mafia practices.

Checks and balances in the political system

While ANO, upon its entry into politics, operated at least on a rhetorical level as a protest, anti-corruption and reform movement, after 2017 it came to focus ever increasingly on conserving its hold on power. Nevertheless, some checks and balances prevented the concentration of power in the hands of Andrej Babiš and his party, and oligarchical state capture. They include institutional barriers such as independent judiciary, the autonomy of the public prosecution service, independent media and active civil society.

The key element is represented by the electoral system of proportional representation applied in elections to the parliamentary Chamber of Deputies, limiting the possibilities for the formation of a one-party cabinet. Other important balancing institutions include the Senate, which acts as the second chamber of

parliament, and also the directly elected president. And it is precisely president Miloš Zeman who has formed the second power base, referred to as the Castle. Even though Zeman and Babiš officially support one another, this was a marriage of convenience; certain interests bring them together, while others set them apart. However, the president has in fact balanced the ambitions of Babiš's ANO.

The Castle – the second power base

Since he was elected for his first term in 2013, President Zeman has succeeded in building the second power base. After the 2017 elections to the Chamber of Deputies he was supported by political allies from the pro-Russian KSČM (Communist Party) and SPD, with a collective total of 16.5% of parliamentary mandates through which the president exerted pressure on the government of Prime Minister Babiš. In order to assert his interests, he made use of close relations with selected politicians from the ČSSD and the circles of ex-president Klaus.

Zeman's key economic allies have been the largest private company PPF and the semi-state enterprise ČEZ (Czech Energy Company), which is the dominant producer of electricity in the Czech Republic. It has also become a regular occurrence for President Zeman to invite representatives of "client" firms on his journeys abroad.

President Zeman has thus become the uncrowned representative of the clientelist networks that were established in the 1990s and in the following cartel period between the ČSSD and ODS in 1998-2002. Zeman has taken on the informal role of a patron, providing protection to all interested clients from the environment of non-transparent business and politics. The new feature and also the danger is the fact that the expansion of domestic clientelism directed by the Castle is taking on an international dimension. Shady domestic business has established links with dubious business partners operating under the authoritarian regimes of post-Soviet countries.

After the 2017 elections: Strategic errors

The two largest power bases – Babiš's empire and Zeman's Castle – were opposed by the liberal-democratic group of five parties in the Chamber of Deputies – ODS, Pirates, KDU-ČSL, TOP 09 and STAN that had 35% of mandates in the Chamber and thus remained in opposition after the 2017 elections. In the run up to the 2017 parliamentary elections these parties formed two coalitions: the three-member conservative-liberal formation of the ODS, TOP 09 and KDU-ČSL under the label "Spolu" ("Together") and the centrist-liberal duo of the Pirate Party and STAN.

Both groups hark back to the tradition of Václav Havel. They emphasise the concept of democracy as an institutional system of checks and balances, as well as anchoring the Czech Republic within estern structures of the European Union

and NATO, asserting moral values in domestic and foreign policy, and development of an active civil society. They define themselves in opposition to both Babiš's oligarchical conflict of interests and Zeman's clientelism, authoritarianism and his orientation towards Russia and China.

Lighted candles to commemorate the death of the ex-president of Czechia Václav Havel on ***Václavské náměstí*** *in Prague in 2011. Source: Shutterstock*

The greatest weakness and strategic error of these liberal-democratic parties was an intransigent and indiscriminate approach towards both power bases, and their inability to actively grasp the theme of national interests and state sovereignty, especially within the context of the migration crisis.

Their implacably hostile approach to Babiš and Zeman represented the gravest error of the democratic forces in the 32 years since the collapse of communism. Due to their inflexibility after the 2017 parliamentary elections, the opposition parties have enabled an unprecedented role of the communists in the government, as well as the influence of Okamura's pro-Russian and nationalist SPD, and in particular the Castle.

Instead of entering the government as coalition partners of Babiš's ANO after the parliamentary elections in 2017, they chose to revel in "splendid isolation", blinded by their would-be moral superiority. Through their amateurish intransigence, these parties excluded themselves from the government, and thereby drove Babiš's ANO into the political clutches of Zeman's Castle. They continue to view pragmatism and co-operation with ANO as a betrayal rather than an obligation in the sense of safeguarding basic democratic values.

After the 2021 elections

Having won the October 2021 elections and formed their five-party coalition cabinet, the liberal-democratic parties once again face the challenge of re-evaluating their "splendid isolation". Co-operation with Babiš's ANO on core national interests can be justified on the condition of setting non-negotiable demands in connection with the democratic development. First of all, this concerns the demand for maintaining the Czech Republic within the Euro-Atlantic sphere, within the context of negotiations concerning the completion of the construction of a nuclear power plant, as well as on the fifth-generation communication infrastructure. It is also possible to define demands in the sense of maintaining or strengthening the autonomy of the public prosecution service, independent media councils and public media.

Similarly, to the oligarch Berlusconi, who maintained his position in the political limelight in Italy for almost 20 years, Babiš will also continue to influence politics in the Czech Republic for a certain time to come. Even after his loss in the parliamentary elections in October 2021 he still represents a sizeable share of the Czech electorate, and probably will run in the presidential elections.

Up to now, the aforementioned conservative and liberal coalitions have been incapable of reflecting upon the fundamental differences between Babiš's ANO and the Castle. The fact is that Babiš is facing criminal prosecution, has an immense conflict of interests and represents a risk for the individual pillars of democracy. However, Babiš cannot be evaluated in entirely black and white terms. It is of fundamental significance that, as the main opposition party, he will not work towards undermining the Czech Republic position within the Euro-Atlantic community.

Michal Klíma is a political scientist at the Metropolitan University Prague. He has published recently Informal Politics in Post-Communist Europe. Political Parties, Clientelism and State Capture (Routledge 2020).

Unified but different?

Assessment of the benefits and costs of German reunification

Katrin Böttger and Simone Klee

30 years after the formal reunification of Germany, the transformation that followed has left complex social realities that are remnants of separation. However, Germany, facing today challenges in a European and global perspective will benefit from looking at the legacies of reunification, their shortcomings and successes.

During an interview on the day of German reunification, in October 1990, Chancellor Helmut Kohl said the following phrase, which is in the center of German debates on society, politics and history even 30 years later: "Through our joint efforts, we will soon succeed in transforming Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Saxony-Anhalt, Brandenburg, Saxony, and Thuringia into blooming landscapes where it is worthwhile to live and work." With this statement Kohl underlined the flourishing prospects for the new federal states, which were now a part of the reunited Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) after almost 60 years of dictatorship. The phrase has left a strong mark in Germany's collective memory, leaving a bitter aftertaste as on each anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the political reunification of the two German states, the question arises if Kohl's promises regarding the blooming landscapes were fulfilled.

In a European perspective the geopolitical successes of the reunification, which are reflected in Germany's stability and self-confidence in the EU and NATO are undeniable. While the fact that the East German population succeeded in a peaceful democratic revolution, exemplary for civil liberties, democratic rights and European values, is rightfully celebrated and delivers a sense of accomplishment to the East Germans of the time, the aftermath of the reunification and its effects disfavoring the East German population still resonate in the society today, hindering a common, or shared, German experience of reunification as an unequivocal European success story. Indeed, the wind of change has also produced negative aspects for the East, such as the large exodus from the new Länder, missing job opportunities and the socio-economic sense of loss. These grievances are present in today's political discourse in Germany and the debate on the legacy of the reunification continues to stir strong emotions. The so-called "winner mentality" of the West vis-à-vis the East is not only to be inferred from Germany's internal relations, but also forms part of the political relations between Western Europe on the one hand and Eastern Europe on the other.

What is needed today is a common debate on the lessons learned from the societal, political and economic transformation processes. It is equally important to give credit and value to the specific East German experiences as part of the success story that brings society in the East and the West see eye to eye.

Unified but different? Germany 30 years after the reunification

The events that triggered the peaceful revolution in 1989 are manyfold. Internally, the economic situation of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was in peril, the standard of living, especially in contrast to the FRG, was more and more recognizable. Taken together the unwillingness of state reform by the leading elite and repression of any opposition movement fostered a dissatisfaction and disillusionment in large parts of the population and created the wish for change, for democratic elections and economic reform. At the same time external factors especially the democratic protests in other Central and Eastern European countries encouraged East German population to become bold, form opposition movements and seek freedom of speech, demonstration and travel through mass civic disobedience.

Part of the East Side Gallery graffiti, authored by Dimitry Vrubel, representing the famous kiss between Leonid Brezhnev and Hennrich Honecker on the Berlin Wall. Source: Shutterstock

It needs to be acknowledged however that reunification was not initially an outcome that was a priority or a self-evident consequence of protests. As Markus Meckel, former Minister for Foreign Affairs of the first and last free elected government of the GDR after the fall of the Berlin Wall, reminds us, only through peaceful transition to democratic elections in 1990 did the people of East Germany open the way for negotiations about reunification. It turned out though that the call for free elections and civil rights was soon encompassed by claims to reunification, which was connected to high hopes of prosperity comparable to the FRG. This was already evident in the win of the conservative Alliance in the first free elections in March 1990 and finally set the path for reunification.

However, today, 30 years after the peaceful revolution, it can be argued that those expectations of prosperity were not fulfilled and Kohl's "blooming landscapes" did not get materialized, which is today a root of dissatisfaction and disappointment

with the German reunification. Generally speaking, there are more citizens in western parts of Germany that are satisfied with the quality of their present life than there are in eastern parts of the state.

Economics is a field where differences are apparent. While the living standards have risen in the new Länder, the wage level in the East remains about 17% lower than in the West. The lower economic strength of federal states such as Saxony or Saxony-Anhalt in contrast to Bavaria or Hesse, the lack of collective labour agreements are two of the main reasons for different salaries. This is true even if the gross average wage per month in both western and eastern Germany increased between 1990 and 2019. While in eastern parts of Germany it grew from 1,820 €/ month in 1996 to 2,850 €/month in 2019, in western Germany it increased from 2,350 €/month in 1996 to 3,340 €/month in 2019. Equally importantly, the inequalities of different incomes have also led to divergent pension rates, with only a slow approximation of pensions in eastern lands to those in the West.

Also the gap in GDP per capita of eastern Länder compared to the western ones is still large - it has been a good 30% for about ten years. Today, eastern Germany is at about the same average level as the western German Länder were in 2005. Overall, it can be said that the most successful eastern German regions are now at the same level as the poorest regions in the West. Saxony's GDP per capita, for example, is almost 7% below that of Schleswig-Holstein. Among Germany's 294 counties (local districts), Potsdam-Mittelmark is the first East German County ranking 164th (measured by income per capita). Among the 50 counties with the lowest per capita income, there are only six from western German lands.

Yorckstraße an old sewer in Potsdam being prepared and decorated for the 30th anniversary of the reunification of Germany in October 2020. Source: Shutterstock

Nevertheless, one of the great success stories of East Germany in recent years has been the enormous decline in unemployment. On the one hand, it has fallen by almost two thirds since its peak in 2005. On the other hand, the East German unemployment rate, after being about twice as high as the West German rate for a long time, is now "only" about 20 to 30% higher. Brandenburg, Saxony and Thuringia have even now unemployment rates below those in North Rhine-Westphalia, Hamburg and Saarland.

Evidently, in eastern Germany demographics remains a serious problem. First of all, the system change triggered different attitudes towards family, particularly among young people (up to 35 years of age), which has led to a dramatic decline in the birth rate. Secondly, there was a massive discrepancy in the emigration from the East to the West and vice versa, which has only been almost equalized in the last two years. Thirdly, after 1990 particularly young women aged 20 to 30 have left East Germany, resulting in a surplus of men in the regions. Finally, the age structure has also changed over the past three decades. While in 1990 people under-20 years old constituted around a fourth of the population in the new Länder, it is estimated that in 2030 their share will decrease to only 17%. By contrast, the number of those who are over-65 years is estimated to rise from 13% in 1990 to over 30% by 2030. It is also estimated that in the period of 2021-2030 the number of retirees from employment in Eastern Germany will be higher than that of the school graduates. These demographic trends will have severe consequences for the labour market and economic strength as well. Combined with lesser paid salaries, East German younger population will seek their career opportunities in the West and the already existing shortage of skilled workers in eastern Germany will even rise in the future.

What is another facet of this demographic situation and also economic disadvantage is that East Germans continue to be massively underrepresented in the German elite. To a greater extent this is true in the media sector, the judiciary, academia and above all business, administration and among intellectuals, but to a lesser extent also in politics. Thus, the federal commission on the 30 years of the peaceful revolution made the representation of East Germans the main focus of their final report. According to it, people of East German descent account for only 3 to 8% of the leading positions in society, while they make up around 17% of the whole population. Even in East Germany this trend holds true. Only close to 25% of all top positions in the administration, judiciary, media, economy and academia are hold by East Germans out of 85% of the total population. This is especially worrisome for societal cohesion.

Different experiences of the transformation after reunification can also be detected in political dimensions. Indeed, there have been different voting patterns recorded in western and eastern Germany in federal elections after the

reunification of Germany 1990. While in West Germany from 1990 to 2017 it was SPD (Social Democrats) and the Union (CDU/CSU) (Christian Democrats) that were the dominant parties in federal elections, in East Germany especially after the federal election in 2005 citizens voted strongly for Die Linke (The Left Party), which during the federal election in 2009 got 28% of the vote. In addition, voters in these regions show a stronger support for the far right with AfD (Alternative for Germany) reaching here 22% in the federal elections in 2017. In general elections Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (The Green Party) and the Liberals (FDP) were stronger in western Germany from 1990 to 2017. In eastern Germany especially the SPD had a weak voter base, reaching only 14% of the vote in the federal election in 2017. In the most recent federal election in 2021 there were also some interesting trends observed in the voting results. While the Social Democrats could almost double their numbers in East Germany (24%) and win most direct mandates, the Left Party, often considered as the representative of East German interests which consistently gathers more votes in East Germany, lost a significant share of votes also in the East (from 17% in 2017 to 10% in 2021). This still remains a significantly better outcome compared to their results in West Germany (4%), which resulted in their entry to the German Bundestag only by a slim margin. It could also be argued that the place of Die Linke has now been taken up by the far right AfD which continued to take a strong hold in East German states also in 2021 elections, reaping off the stereotype about the East and West as well as the feelings of disappointment with the government. They managed to collect 20% of the votes in East Germany, passing the Christian Democrats (17%) as the second strongest party.

An AfD poster in Erfurt before the 2019 elections. It states: our city Erfurt – our rules. Source: Shutterstock

Taken together, this can serve as an indication that 30 years after the transformation, the German state remains unified but different. Surely though, if we want to understand the challenges that Germany is facing now it is clear that the situation cannot solely be judged on along the East-West division line. As in many globalized societies of the 21st century, social inequality has been growing in Germany, not only due to the cleavages between the East and the West but also because of other factors such as the economic strength of certain regions and disparities between peripheries and metropolitan centers, technological advantages and resilience of social structure, the degree of emigration and immigration as well as political stability.

Perspectives matter. More recent views on German reunification

In 2009, that is 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, there was a clear majority in both the East and the West that judged reunification as having been the right thing with above 90% and 85% of approval respectively. This overall positive mood has carried on till today and was reflected in a commission report of the Ministry of the Interior towards the 30th anniversary after the end of the GDR that was published in 2020. Notably, the same report, despite its positive assessments, warns against processes of cultural, mental and emotional transformation that have not yet been completed.

The heated political culture of the past decade, as well as the historical reappraisal in the third decade after 1990, have contributed to the phenomenon that individuals have slightly turned away from the German-German success story. However, according to the current academic research this is based more on personal stories of individual witnesses, while in the collective memory in Germany the reunification is regarded as something rightful and celebratory.

At the same time, the consensus has emerged that the assumption of federal government in 1990 that it would be able to develop a self-sustaining economic upswing within a few years through regulatory decisions and massive transfers proved to be a fallacy. Surveys of recent decades also show that the concepts of the “East” and the “West” continue to be relevant, as only a low double-digit percentage of respondents could confirm that their importance is decreasing. This is illustrated by the image of many citizens in the East that the GDR was taken over by the FRG and that a profound unification of the two German states has taken place only on paper.

In the recent years this belief has been additionally accelerated by the socio-political processes, such as the rise of the right-wing populist parties and the anti-democratic movements (AfD and Pegida) that instrumentalize slogans of the peaceful revolution of 1989 as a claim to legitimacy for their anti-democratic purposes and draw from people’s disappointment with reunification processes

that seem to take hold especially in former East Germany. This has, in turn, been accompanied by the reappearance of some clichés created in reaction to their rise, which were more widely discussed at the end of the 20th century, i.e., that East Germans were economically marginalized and unfit for democracy. This exemplifies a lack of understanding of historical and political realities as well as persistent and available prejudices against the East German experiences. Furthermore, it is noted that in public discourse in media and the society, the general picture of life in the East, before and after the reunification, is portrayed mostly from the western perspective, while the diversity of different East-German identities remains underrepresented.

Different views on the legacy of the GDR continue even 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. In 2009, more than 57% of East German respondents were positive about the GDR, while only 18% of West German respondents saw the Eastern part positively. This reveals a fundamental difference in the evaluation of a system, which is still relevant today due to a cross-generational socialization. Opinions on the Treuhandanstalt, which was set up to privatize state-owned enterprises in the GDR and introduce them into the social market economy of the FRG, are fundamentally different. While 71% people in the East think that the Treuhandanstalt has benefited particular West German companies, only 44% in the West hold the same view.

It can be noticed that different perspectives in the debate are influenced by generational aspects as well. The post-reunification generation plays a central role in the rise of internal social difference within the East, as divergent identity patterns reveal differences that were not yet to be seen in the first two decades after 1990. Thus, in the eastern regions of today's Germany, a young "Generation-East" has emerged, that experienced reunification at a young age and who, through the experiences of devaluation (biographical changes, wage differences, less career opportunities, stigmatization, etc.) developed their own identity in their youth in an otherwise reunified Germany. It can be noticed that the younger generation, born after the reunification, identifies themselves mainly with a reunited Germany, while an exclusive identification with West Germany or the GDR plays a marginal role for its representatives.

Conclusions

For Germany's future, as a unified country in a European community, it continues to be important to recognize the legacy and lessons learned from the German reunification. While politics and society have largely been completely transformed, there are still differences in wage policies, for example, which could potentially disrupt social domestic peace in Germany. This recognition includes an exploration into and an acknowledgement of the experiences of the people

who underwent incredible phases of transformation in the eastern parts of the country, which changed every imaginable area of life, from a political-cultural point of view towards the socio-economic area. Especially in this context, it remains a priority to acknowledge that societal transformation is still ongoing, where socio-political and economic divisions between the East and the West are maybe becoming less relevant as other factors emerge. Remembering and analyzing the costs and benefits of the German reunification not from a western or eastern perspective but a European cross generational and interdisciplinary perspective can serve as valuable lessons to face transformation challenges of a close-connected European society.

Dr. Katrin Böttger is a director at the Institut fuer Europaeische Politik, Berlin. Her work and research focus on the EU Enlargement and Neighborhood Policy as well as Germany`s European Policy.

Simone Klee is the project manager for „EUritage" at IEP. She holds a master's degree in European Studies and has a background in civic education.

Central Europe, the EU, and I

Marie Kepler

Today the European continent is closer than ever before to the dream of unity and peace. But endangering and reducing the separation of powers, freedom of press and the rule of law goes against these foundations, the basis of our consensus and against the pan-European vision.

In 1989 the European continent was closer than ever to the dream of unity and peace. The revolutions of 1989 not only led to the rediscovery of Central Europe, but also to a return to the pan-European idea. Acknowledging the failure of nationalistic attempts to reach liberated societies, created space for a realisation of the pan-European project, which was put into practice with the enlargement of the EU in 2004. It allowed for a large part of our generation – the millennials – to grow up in the spirit of European solidarity, prosperity and safety. Through this, the EU became more than a common market, more than a uniform legislative framework and more than just an institutions of Western European states. Finally, the citizens of Central Europe were integrated into the community of shared values.

The Central European citizens' devotion and relentless strive for democracy enabled me to grow up in a unified Germany and in a unified Europe. I have not experienced economic hardship, conflicts with neighbours nor a war. I took democratic foundations for granted for a long time. This is why I saw the unification of Germany and the 1989 revolutions as democracy's victory, as the triumph of Western values of freedom and equality, which after centuries of animosities and conflict, were institutionalised further with the EU enlargement in 2004.

A road sign on the L1005 road between Thuringia and Lower Saxony. Placard found in all roads between western and eastern Germany that were blocked during the country's division. The text reads: "Here, Germany and Europe were divided until December 10, 1989, 10:15 am". The date and time vary according to the actual moment when a particular crossing was opened. Source: Wikipedia, Author: Doris Antony

2004 was a commitment to peaceful solutions, to multilateralism, but also to social justice, welfare state and climate protection. These features are emphasised as part of a European identity but often only become apparent in comparison to other parts of the world like the US or China. They are features I represent with pride. As a result of this, other ideals or values seemed foreign to me.

However, the growth of authoritarian tendencies in countries like Hungary and Poland, as well as Euroscepticism, which is spreading not only there but also in Western European countries like Great Britain, Italy and even Germany, contradict this assumption. 2004 was not only a reunification, but also a public acknowledgement of the differences and diversities within Europe. Different cultures, histories and structures characterise the European jungle and every coarse simplification of this would not reflect our reality. We are not the same and that should never be the aim of the European Union. The period between the end of communism until today has also been shaped by problems and mistakes, as well as a dangerous ease, verging ignorance. People were not listened to properly, certain groups were disregarded and culture-specific characteristics were neglected. These mistakes have to be recognized, to give the Central European community the time to grow together and to strengthen the consciousness of unity in history, particularly within the younger generation.

1989 played a different role in each country as the time did not only offer immense chances but also created unseen challenges and crises for the Central European nations. The democratisation was not fuelled by unified European grassroot movements everywhere, but rather depended on the peaceful willingness of higher levels and people in leadership positions. Therefore, Timothy Garton Ash's notion of refolutions – a merging of reform and revolution – is more appropriate to describe the events. In return, this is reflected in the different perceptions of the end of communism and explains the differing social memories of 1989. For example, while for me the fall of the Berlin Wall took up a large part of my school education in history and my national understanding, friends from Hungary and Poland tell me that other events, such as the Prague Spring, are considered much more important.

It is vital that these refolutions take a larger place in the historical consciousness of Central Europe. But how can this be achieved? Here, we are able to learn from the late 1980s as well. Although the democratic transformations were not a unified movement, activists in all countries benefited from each other. Connected to this, the role of the media and of TV must be emphasized. The photos from the Sametová revoluce (Velvet Revolution) in Czechoslovakia and the opening of the border between Hungary and Austria mutually inspired and encouraged the citizens and gave hope.

Today social media and networks allows us to be even more connected than in the 1980s. The younger generation is able to network faster, exchange and inspire. Based on our shared histories we need to create a new Central European bond by embracing and standing up for our democratic foundations. Youth exchanges, events and platforms, both digital and analogue, are therefore of incredible value. Through this, the democratic transformations in Central European societies, as well as the European integration processes should be emphasized even more to create a common European future.

Today the European continent is closer than ever before to the dream of unity and peace. But endangering and reducing the separation of powers, freedom of press and the rule of law goes against these foundations, the basis of our consensus and against the pan-European vision. This is why the heritage of the democratic refolutions and the EU extension is gaining immense political relevance.

We, as a young generation, need to be more aware of our similar histories to strengthen our commonalities, which are needed to overcome challenges in the future and build a more resilient Europe. The moral "us" is more important than ever. A constant discussion and continuous exchange on questions such as: "What is Europe?", "What do we have in common?", "How can we learn from each other?" are indispensable.

The essay was written in July 2020.

Marie Kepler is a history graduate from Durham University in Great Britain. The focus of here studies was human rights in South East Asia in the 20th century and European history after 1945. She is also a Junior Editor for the Diplomatisches Magazin where she writes articles and conducts interviews on international politics. Currently she is gaining professional experience abroad in Malaysia and Cambodia.

The breakthrough moments of 1989 and 2004

– how freedom brought us Wrocław back

Tomasz Kubiak

I was lucky enough to be born in a free and democratic Poland. When I turned seven I could officially call myself a European. However, at that time I did not yet fully understand what it meant. Today, when I think of my life before 2004, I see images of grey and sad streets. Maybe this is the reason why I was never impressed with the youth photos of my grandparents. The black and white colours on those photographs did not look any different from those that I remember from my childhood. In fact, the streetcars that I could see on my grandmother's photos were almost identical to those I could see during our weekend shopping trips. The Oder river was flowing in the same direction and the old German buildings were in the same dire shape.

With time I understood how much things have changed since then. The everyday life became more colourful to us, and people started to smile. These changes have been a result of the political freedom which allowed us to develop better. The truth is: without the revolution of 1989 none of what I described above would have been possible, while the continuation of these changes was marked by 2004. It was the year when Poland joined the European Union.

Today we know that there is no free Poland, nor free Central Europe, without the European Union. Nor the other way round: there is no strong EU without our region. The scale of changes which have taken place in the whole region of Central Europe and which were marked by 1989 and 2004 can also be seen in Wrocław – the city where I was born. This capital of the Lower Silesia region, rightly called by the British historian Norman Davies a microcosm, is a true portrait of a Central European town.

Matter of fact, the generation that was born in Wrocław after 1989 was the first post-war generation of city residents who, in addition to having an established national identity, identify themselves with their local homeland. By contrast, our grandparents were often reminiscing their childhood outside Wrocław. Their stories included references to the legendary culture of Lviv's hooligans, the so-called batyars, the flavour of dumplings from Poznań or the strong wind that is characteristic for Kielce a town in Central Poland. Also their language included words of Ukrainian, German or even Yiddish origin. For them co-existence with other ethnic groups was something normal, but it also had its tragic side. One that they wanted to forget about.

My parents, in turn, had to learn how to live in a different system than the one they had been raised in. They did not have many contacts with the world outside Poland. Apparently, they lived in Eastern Europe, and their knowledge of other cultures came from the war stories of their parents. That is why, in their view Wrocław is the city of the first dynasty of the Polish kings – the Piasts. They have heard some things about the German Breslau, but the stories about those other residents of the city were either used to scare them or silenced over, as the main massage was: "they harmed us a lot too".

The history of the city, just like the story of the Polish local governance, has re-started after 1989. It was thus then when for the first time in the post-war history we could get to know the real Wrocław. It is also the moment when the decision was made to stop removing traces of German presence in the city, to halt the process of the so-called "de-Prussification", and replacing them with the idea of the "Piast, meaning Polish, Silesia". However, it took some time before we all started feeling that the city was our home. The problem was not that there was not enough of the Polishness here, but rather that there were hidden secrets that we were to uncover soon. Wrocław was thus to be re-discovered, together with its plethora of different cultures that had existed here even though they were not talked about.

I also remember the first trip I made to Kraków and how I was surprised when I saw the tableaux decorating St Mary's Cathedral at the city's Main Square. When reading them I could not understand why they were all written in Polish. The first thought that came to my mind was: "These are old writings, why aren't they written in German?" Used to Wroclaw landscape I also noticed that Kraków's Czech or German traces did not impress me at all. In a way, they seem very local to me. Instead, what was truly impressive was the fact that everybody spoke Polish here. In this way, the Lesser Poland region, where Kraków is the capital, was somehow very different from Lower Silesia. Similar feelings accompanied me during one of my trips to Germany. Here, however, so many elements of local architecture reminded me of my hometown. Only the language was different. The surroundings however were very, very familiar. This experience made me realize how natural for us, the young generation of Lower Silesia, this blending of cultures is. And how close we are, not only in geographic terms, to our Czech and German neighbours.

The symbol of this blending of cultures is the two-headed Habsburg eagle which decorates an entrance to the main building of the University of Wrocław. Knowing the history of the city, this image is very natural to me, as it is indeed a part of our local identity. However, before 1989, the very same door was decorated with a Polish eagle which was supposed to imitate the Piast coat of arms. It was only after the democratic changes which took place in Poland in the 1990s that the University of Wrocław could bring back the older symbols back to the public display. The same story is that of the city's coat of arms. After 1989 the Habsburg Imperial coat of arms, with a Czech lion on it, was brought back. It happened at the time when, for the first time since the end of the war, Polish residents of the city, but also the city itself, could start to freely express their will.

The entrance to the University of Wrocław with the two-headed Habsburg eagle. The University was established in 1702 by Emperor Leopold I. Source: Shutterstock

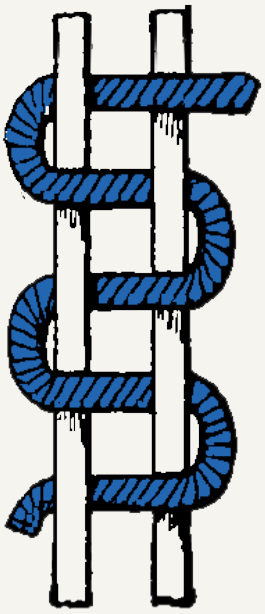
The self-identification with the city and the region is very important for the development of the local governance, which has been rightly called one of the greatest accomplishments of Polish transformation started in 1989. Also, the acceptance of the whole complexity of Lower Silesia's cultural landscape as one that is shared by all its residents was a huge accomplishment of the peaceful evolution of the Polish political system. It allowed for an unrestricted development of culture, brought decision-making to a lower level, and most importantly, has helped to protect Polish democracy today. We can now clearly see that both the political freedom but also the freedom to co-create local reality are the reflections of the power that has been put into the hands of Polish citizens since 1989.

Lower Silesia is a special place, also from the perspective of the 2004 EU enlargement. We can even say that everything started here. The Polish-German Reconciliation Mass which took place in Krzyżowa in 1989, and which marked the first meeting of the first non-communist prime minister, Tadeusz Mazowiecki

and the German chancellor, Helmut Kohl, was not only of symbolic significance. This event can be regarded as the first decisive step that Poland took towards European integration. For our generation this process has been especially important. It shaped us as Poles but also as fully righted Europeans. Close in terms of distance, but mentally more remote Germany and Czechia became our nearest neighbours. City-to-city cooperations started to take place, new transport connections developed, and the so-called Euroregions got a real meaning. Most importantly, after the entrance to the European Union we stopped living on Poland's edge or the western borderlands of Eastern Europe. From that moment on we have been living in the middle of Europe.

By treating Poland as part of Central Europe I often hear that I distance myself from Eastern Europe. However, anyone who has ever walked on the streets of Bratislava, Wrocław or Brno, or read a few pages of Milan Kundera's writing, will understand that the culture of Central European is too complex to describe it by one adjective only: be it western or eastern. It is rather an escape, but an escape from the lengthy process of explaining the diversity of this region. Thus for some people it is easier to include it in one term only.

However, today neglecting the existence of Central Europe is not the biggest problem. The problems that we are faced with are the growth of nationalism, populism and historical revisionism that we did not expect to see and that have been hunting us now. It is also disheartening that the support for the political forces who have been trying to discredit the accomplishments of the years 1989 and 2004, and especially their peaceful nature, is also on the rise. That is why today, more than ever, we need to preserve these accomplishments. They include: our freedom, local governance, rule of law and unity in diversity.

Wrocław was already destroyed once. It happened during the Second World War and was the work of the fanatic and barbarian Nazi totalitarian system. As a result, our grandparents and parents lost their freedom and got isolated from the rest of the world. That is why as the first generation born in a Poland that is free, we have a special role to play. We have to defend the accomplishments of both years 1989 and 2004 as the years which brought us freedom and allowed to be a part of a united Europe.

Tomasz Kubiak is a student of international relations at the Jagiellonian University. He is a committed European who feels at home in Wrocław, Cologne and Lviv. He is passionate about Central and Eastern Europe as well as the Balkans. In the future he would like to pursue an academic career.