

# Central-Eastern Europe, the EU and Myself

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This essay was written as part of the EUritage Essay Challenge “Central-Eastern Europe, the EU and myself” It addresses the question: What do the revolutions of 1989 and the enlargement of the European Union in 2004 mean to you, your home country and Europe?

In 1989, Europe found itself reaching for unity and peace. The revolutions of 1989 did not only initiate a rediscovery of Central-Eastern Europe but also a return to the pan-European idea. The Polish *Solidarność* (Solidarity) movement, the *Rendszerváltás* (Regime Change) in Hungary, the fall of the Berlin Wall in Germany or the Czech *sametová revoluce* (Velvet Revolution) all formed this trend. The political changes that dismantled the Iron Curtain acknowledged the failure of suppressive attempts to “liberate” societies and opened the space for a realisation of the pan-European project, which was put into practice with the fifth extension of the European Union in 2004.<sup>1</sup> This enabled following generations to grow up in European solidarity, prosperity and security. The EU became more than a common market, more than a legislator, and more than an institution of West European states. Finally, the citizens of Central-Eastern Europe were integrated into a community of shared values. However, the reality today is not as smooth as one imagines the past to be. Britain left the EU in 2016, Euroscepticism can be found in almost all member states, values are disputed and often the underlying issue causing controversy about future European policies. Most recently, Poland has formulated stricter abortion laws, and in a joined effort with Hungary is blocking negotiations on the new Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027, including the

much needed EU Recovery Funds, due to its link to the fulfilment of a rule of law clause. This essay aims to analyse how differing perceptions of the EU are rooted in our diverse past, arguing that although a common European experience exists, interpretations and memories of the 1989 revolutions vary and should continuously be reconsidered. The essay explores the notions and social memories of 1989 and 2004 and confronts them with nuanced historical analyses, before returning to the present to examine the implications of these differing experiences on the immediate and long term future.

My personal experience offers a way of understanding the lasting effects of these movements. As a German citizen growing up in a united country, I took democratic foundations for granted. I was taught to see the unification of Germany and the 1989 revolutions as democracy’s magnificent victory, as the triumph of Western values of freedom and equality, after centuries of animosities and conflict. The citizens’ devotion and relentless strive for democracy enabled me to grow up in a unified Germany and in a unified Europe. I have not encountered economic hardship, conflict with neighbouring states, nor have I endured war. In my historical understanding, it was an affirmation to peaceful solutions, to states being ruled by the people, as well as to social equality and to the welfare state - features and values that are characterised as part of an European

<sup>1</sup> See for instance: Steven Saxonberg, *The Fall. A Comparative Study of the End of Communism in Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary and Poland* (Amsterdam, 2001).

identity but often only become apparent in comparison to other parts of the world like China or the USA. Values that I represent with pride.

It was the people that came together to demand change, in a way that meant leaders could no longer keep control, and so submitted to the pressure of the revolutions. Across European history, due to the preeminent exemplar of the French Revolution or the Springtime of the Peoples in 1848, revolutions had previously been intertwined with the notion of violent unrest.<sup>2</sup> However, 1989 caused a redefinition of the term, as these political revolutions were not characterised by violence but defined by mostly peaceful changes of governments.<sup>3</sup> For instance, in East Germany, dissatisfaction with everyday socialist life, economic decline and additional restrictions on the freedom to travel were among the triggers of the protests, which grew into a broad and non-violent movement. New parties and democratic organizations such as the *Neue Forum* (New Forum) were formed and, encouraged by the success in neighbouring states, mobilised mass protests that demanded an overhaul of the government. The fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 symbolised this immense power of peaceful protests, resulting in the reunification of a country that had been divided for 41 years.

However, upon closer examination one can see that 1989 and the new social memories that evolved from it, played a very different role in each country. Democratisation across the continent was not a unified grassroots movement. Instead, it also depended on the willingness of higher levels (institutions?) and individuals in leading positions recognising the necessity to make concessions. This becomes particularly evident in the case of Hungary. Even before Gorbachev took power in the Soviet Union, the Hungarian communist government started to implement reforms in an attempt to save the dwindling economy, resulting in for instance

the 1988 tax reforms and the further opening of the political system under Károly Grósz.<sup>4</sup> Parallel to the reform policy from above, the citizens' movement from below expressed their demands through the formation of new parties and Round Table discussions.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the transformation to a constitutional democratic state reached in parliament was a rather noiseless and negotiated transition.<sup>6</sup> This is why Timothy Garthon Ash's term of 'Refolution', a neologism between reform and revolution, is more suitable.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the demands from below were met with a willingness from above and prevented crackdowns on people similar to the crushed uprising in Hungary in 1956 or the Prague Spring in 1968.<sup>8</sup> These diverse endings of communism define the different national historical consciousness and therefore, reason the varying social memories connected to 1989. While the fall of the Berlin Wall was of central focus in my historical education and shaped my national identity, friends from Hungary have been taught a history with a different emphasis. Instead, they focus on different historical events such as the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, that are also not necessarily embedded in a European context. This shifts the focus more towards a nationalistic historical education and also raises questions about the definitions of revolutions and the significance their grassroots characters play in defining the society's memory of them. While in my personal experience, the power of ordinary people in demanding change was emphasised repeatedly, this might happen to a lesser degree where reforms were already underway. The realisation, that our past is not identical, although often generalised under the term of Europe's Revolution of 1989, is vital. The term revolution has many facets and as a result of this, different implications for the shaping of the collective memory of societies, which shape our perception of the present and future.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the diverse images

<sup>2</sup> See for instance: E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution 1789-1848*, (New York, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> S. Antohi and V. Tismaneanu (ed.), *Between Past and Future: The Revolutions of 1989 and Their Aftermath* (Budapest, 2000), p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> S. Kurtán (ed.), *Vor der Wende. Politisches System, Gesellschaft und Reformen im Ungarn der achtziger Jahre*, (Vienna, 1993), p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> A. Rácz, 'Verfassungsrechtliche Veränderungen und die Durchsetzung des Parlamentarismus in Ungarn' in U. Thaysen, H. M. Kloth (ed.), *Wandel durch Repräsentation – Repräsentation durch Wandel. Entstehung und Ausformung der parlamentarischen Demokratie in Ungarn, Polen, der Tschechoslowakei und der ehemaligen DDR* (Baden-Baden, 1992), pp. 63-68.

<sup>7</sup> See for instance T. Garthon Ash, *The Uses of Adversity: Essays on the Fate of Central Europe* (New York, 1989), pp. 260 ff.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> H. Harrison, *After the Berlin Wall: Memory and the Making of the New Germany, 1989 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2019).

countries have of the 1989 revolutions and thus the resulting unification within the European Union have massive implications on the perception of pan-European ideas and policies.

This becomes particularly evident when examining the integration of the Central-Eastern nation into the European Union. The ending of Europe's division in 1989 was institutionalised when ten previous member states of the Eastern bloc joined the European Union in May 2004. In the early 1990s, as a result of the renewed foreign policies being orientated towards unity with Western Europe, the Eastern Enlargement Process began. In order to join the EU, potential member states had to fulfill standards such as stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, human rights and the rule of law, as well as respect for and protection of minorities and a functioning market economy.<sup>10</sup> This was only enabled by the changes happening within the nations during the 1990s and was implemented in 2004, when a large majority of the continent was institutionally united. In many places, such as capitals and border crossings, this was marked by large public celebrations. At the Polish-Czech-German border trijunction, Poland's Prime Minister Leszek Miller, the Czech Prime Minister Vladimir Spidla, and Germany's Chancellor Schröder gathered for the big celebrations among several thousands citizens. They celebrated their unification within the European Union and commemorated the people that laid the foundations for this unification in 1989.<sup>11</sup> As Chancellor Schröder expressed, it was the people and their peaceful revolutions that made the unification possible.<sup>12</sup> This implies a positive social memory connected to the events that followed the events of 1989. It is also why many observers thought it was more appropriate to speak less about the enlargement of Europe and more about a final overcoming of its

division. The opening of the EU to the Central and Eastern European countries was not a strategic re-orientation, but the fulfillment of the original, larger European project that could not be realized after 1945 due to the outbreak of the Cold War.<sup>13</sup> What Willy Brandt, the West German Chancellor famous for his communicative and collaborative Ostpolitik (foreign policy towards the Eastern bloc), predicted for Germany in 1989, applied to Europe in May 2004: "Es wächst zusammen, was zusammen gehört" ("What belongs together, grows together").<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, in contrast to the unrestrained euphoria that defined the European atmosphere in 1989, the situation and celebrations in 2004 were also accompanied by doubt and more sober outlooks into the future. The changes did not only offer immense chances but also created unseen challenges and crises in the European nations. 2004 was not only a unification, but also an open affirmation to 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 identical and this should never be our aim. The period between the end of the Cold War in Europe until today has also been shaped by problems and mistakes, as well as a dangerous ease, verging ignorance. People were not listened to, certain groups were disregarded and cultural-specific qualities neglected. This becomes evident in the growth of Euroscepticism often voiced by new right wing parties such as the *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany). The party reached an average of 21.9 percent in the federal states of the former German Democratic, compared to a national result of only 10.7 percent, highlighting that the country is, to an extent, still divided on topics such as the role of the European Union.<sup>15</sup> The previously mentioned mistakes have to be recognized, to give the European

<sup>10</sup> European Commission, 'Conditions for Membership', accessed at [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/conditions-membership\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/conditions-membership_en) (20 November 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Gerhard Schröder, 'Speech on the Enlargement of the European Union' (30 April 2004), *Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung, Bulletin Nr. 41-1*.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Marten, 'Das erweiterte Europa', *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, B 17, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Willy Brandt, 'Speech at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin', (10. November 1989) found in Timothy Garton Ash: 'Wächst zusammen, was zusammen gehört?', *Bundeskanzler-Willy-Brandt-Stiftung, Deutschland und Europa 10 Jahre nach dem Fall der Mauer*, Schriftenreihe Heft 8 (2001), p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> F. Goeldner, 'Germany and the AfD 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall: still a divided country?' *Eyes on Europe* (7 January 2020), accessed at <https://www.eyes-on-europe.eu/germany-still-a-divided-country/> (20.11.2020).

community the time to grow together and to strengthen the consciousness of unity in similar histories, particularly within the younger generation.

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 images of the Sametová revoluce (Velvet Revolution) in Czechoslovakia or the opening borders between Hungary and Austria inspired and encouraged citizens. Today, network connections offer an even bigger chance than at the end of the 1980s. As a young generation we can connect, exchange our ideas and inspire each other even quicker. Based on our shared histories we need to create a new European bond by embracing and standing up for our democratic foundations. Youth exchanges, online events and platforms in digital and analogue forms are of incredible value for this. Through this, the democratic transformations in Central-Eastern European societies, as well as the EU's integration processes should be emphasized even more to create a common European future.

Today, the European continent is as close to peace and unity as ever before. However, the reduction of the division of power, freedom of press and the rule of law in some member states threaten the foundations and the basis of our commonalities and the pan-European vision. This is why the heritage and social memory of the democratic revolutions and 'Revolutions' and the EU's extension is of 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. A continuous debate and discussion on questions such as: "What is Europe?", "What do we have in common?", "How can we learn from one another?" are indispensable.

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