

THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL AND GERMAN REUNIFICATION

On 30 October, three elderly statesmen met to congratulate each other on the role they played in Germany's reunification: Helmut Kohl, Mikhail Gorbachev and George Bush. They all had their own reasons for doing so. The Russian President had ruled out the use of violence to keep the Soviet empire intact. He just let go and, with the fall of the Wall, the most dramatic event which closed the twentieth century, the whole Soviet empire collapsed, and in a domino effect that spread with breathtaking speed the regimes of Eastern European bloc countries were toppled one after another. Helmut Kohl adjusted swiftly to the rapidly changing situation, offering first in the autumn a confederation within a timeframe of ten years and then reunification at the beginning of 1990. Although he acted sometimes alone – when drawing up his confederation plan, for which he consulted none of his allies, or when bickering over Poland's borders, testing his fellow citizens' mood – he mostly remained close to both the USSR and the United States, the two main guarantors of Germany's status. The Americans supported the German Chancellor while cajoling and pressing the Russian President.



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From left to right: The last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, former U.S. President George H.W. Bush and former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl shake hands during an event in Berlin on 31 October 2009, marking the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Two statesmen – and one stateswoman – were missing: Margaret Thatcher, who in 1989 thought the spectre of the past was returning to haunt Europe and opposed Germany's reunification on the grounds that it would alter the balance of power on the continent; François Mitterrand (who died in 1996 and would otherwise have been present at this triangular meeting)

certainly had reservations about German reunification and even tried to put a brake on it, if not actively prevent it, when he met with Mr. Gorbachev in Kiev in February 1990, but he eventually relented in the most clever way, pushing for the further integration of Germany in a more integrated Europe. One political figure however was regrettably absent – a sign of the times? – Jacques Delors, who was President of the European Commission in those years and who contributed both to the reunification of Germany in the EU and to the unification of the continent by embracing the new democracies.

The continental overhaul could not have taken place in a more orderly and peaceful manner – leaving aside,

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alas, the bloody breakdown of Yugoslavia that was to follow in the 1990s and the shootings and the wars on the periphery of the Soviet Union, from the Baltic to the Caucasus. The organisations which had pacified and strengthened Western Europe after the Second World War extended their area of peace, democracy and prosperity to most of the newly independent states of what had formerly been the Soviet bloc. Some of the Member States of the European Union certainly hesitated for a while but Germany's role as an advocate of Poland in particular was crucial. On the whole, the EU acted in a way that was both incremental and innovative, gradually extending its framework, principles, governance, laws, and policies and devising a network of relations with states which stayed outside of it.

Certain mistakes however were committed and omissions made. The main mistake pertained to the military organisation of the continent: Russians and Americans formally agreed to the inclusion of Germany, and later Central and Eastern Europe, within the Atlantic organisation, without the latter however expanding its military network beyond what had been the Iron Curtain.

The omission was about the European Union: at Maastricht and later, political unification was writ small. Chancellor Kohl pushed for political unification in exchange for economic and monetary unification, calling for an increase in federal powers. However this ruffled more than one set of feathers: François Mitterrand agreed only to a makeshift political transformation: the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), European foreign policy, an inter-governmental process instead of further political integration – even though

the European Parliament increased its powers. The last chance to push for a European federation was made in the mid-1990s when Wolfgang Schäuble and Karl Lamers came up with the idea of a hard core of European states. Many European politicians took offence – as the Germans wanted to concentrate power, including military power, within the same single core of France, Italy... and Germany, excluding the British. Schäuble and Lamers were actually open to discussions – which never took place.

The time was ripe then. Twenty to fifteen years later we have entered a new phase, where national paradigms and egos more than the vision of a united Europe dictate the mood of the day. Certainly in the year 2000 Chancellor Schröder's brilliant Minister for Foreign Affairs, Joschka Fischer, dreamt aloud of a closer-knit Europe, at the old University of Berlin. But it was a dream, the vision of a private individual as he put it and his Chancellor never committed himself to an ever closer Europe – on the contrary, he was the first to mention Germany's power and to lambast Brussels' use of German money. Europe had missed the train – France had missed the train.

In other words, we can only rejoice that the major upheavals of the last decade of the last century hardly led to any bloodshed – apart of course from the tragic episode of the Balkans. The organisation of the continent used the previous Western, democratic organisations as frameworks. Yet it would be advisable to ponder the two major mistakes which were made: first, totally missing the opportunity to get Russia on board, and secondly, imagining what kind of actor the European Union should be in the coming decades.

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the EUISS