

The end of the Cold War and the geopolitical changes in Europe

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The late 20th century was a time of major geopolitical upheaval in Eastern Europe. The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 put an end to the Cold War and the divisions that dated back to the Second World War. The fall of the Communist bloc brought about the end of a bipolar world built around the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. Economic and military structures such as Comecon (the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance) and the Warsaw Pact were dissolved in 1991. The events of the late 1980s marked the beginning of improved relations between two parts of the continent that had long been divided. Political and economic reforms were carried out throughout Europe, providing favourable conditions for the creation of a market economy and the establishment of pluralist parliamentary democracies based on the rule of law. Success was far from guaranteed, however, as demonstrated by the violent end of the Communist dictatorship in Yugoslavia.

Western Europe was torn between the hopes born of détente and the anxiety caused by periods of tension. The new regimes soon declared their intention to turn to the countries of Western Europe for the necessary economic aid and assistance to facilitate the transition. The aspiration for ownership and modernity embodied by the European Union was a driving force behind the transformation of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEECs). But the European Union, tasked with this historic mission, also had to work to offer these states the prospect of access to its area of peace and prosperity, along with the means and method that would open up this area for them. The disappearance of the iron curtain also paved the way for the reunification of Germany and then of the whole of Europe. In June 1993, at the Copenhagen European Council, the European Union enlargement process was officially launched. This process was unique in the EU's history because of the number of applicant countries and the considerable size of their populations. Europe's infrastructures — including the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), the Council of Europe and Western European Union (WEU) — also had to be enlarged and transformed so that they would be better suited to the new political order in Eastern Europe.