The reshaping of Europe

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At the end of the 20th century, Eastern Europe experienced political events and economic changes which radically altered the geopolitical situation in Europe and transformed existing institutions. The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 speeded up the removal of exhausted Communist regimes. In Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), and in Romania and Bulgaria, authoritarian regimes gave way to elected pluralist coalitions. As it disappeared, the Communist bloc took with it the military structures of the Warsaw Pact and the planned economic system of Comecon. The former satellite states of the Soviet Union, keen to defend human rights and adopt the principles of the market economy, immediately turned to Western structures.

The Council of Europe, which those countries rapidly joined, acted as an antechamber to their membership of the European Communities, with which they were seeking to strengthen their relations. In addition, German reunification made it possible for the European Communities to be enlarged towards the East. As early as July 1989, at the Paris Summit of the Group of Seven (G7), the European Commission was given the task of coordinating the assistance provided by a certain number of Western donor countries. The European Communities also adopted a series of programmes giving financial and technical support to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEECs). This support was intended to help them create the conditions for a market economy based on private property and enterprise.

Following the geopolitical changes in Europe after the end of the Cold War, some Central European countries, freed from the yoke of Communism, established political and economic structures with a view to developing regional cooperation and preparing for future accession to the European Communities. This approach led to the creation of the Visegrad Group and the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA).

The CEECs and the states that had emerged from the implosion of the Soviet Union also received support from the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), which, at the Paris Summit in November 1990, decided to take part in the management of the historic changes in Europe and to respond to the new challenges of the post-Cold War period by providing itself with permanent institutions and operational capacities. The CSCE expanded, and in 1994 it became the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which sought to encourage the emergence of a European security identity.

The new democracies also established closer relations with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), of which they would gradually become members. The CEECs regarded their integration into Euro-Atlantic military structures as a guarantee of their security and independence in the light of the attempts at interference made by the Russian Federation, the putative successor to the Soviet Union. As the European component of the transatlantic security system was reinforced, so NATO redefined its missions and its method of operation. The end of the Cold War and the transformation of NATO led the countries of Western European Union (WEU), awakening from their 30-year slumber, to strengthen the European pillar of the Atlantic Alliance and to turn WEU into the military arm of the European Union. At the same time, Germany, France, Belgium, Spain and Luxembourg formed the 'Eurocorps', which is regarded as the embryo of a future European army and can be made available to both NATO and WEU.