

A new impetus for the Council of Europe

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A new impetus for the Council of Europe

Founded in 1949, the Council of Europe was primarily concerned with human rights and cooperation among the European States as regards social, cultural and legal matters. It had progressively welcomed all States which were committed to liberal democracy and political pluralism. Portugal and Spain were not able to join until after the collapse of their authoritarian regimes. Communist countries, by definition, were excluded.

Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of greater openness enabled Finland, which had kept its democratic regime in spite of a cooperation treaty which maintained its links with the USSR, to join the Council of Europe in 1989. Then, as soon as they had adopted democratic institutions, the countries of the former Eastern bloc were able to join: Hungary in 1990, Poland in 1991 along with Czechoslovakia (which was to split in 1993 to form the Czech Republic and Slovakia), Bulgaria in 1992, Estonia and Lithuania in 1993 along with Romania, in spite of that country's inadequate democratisation. Then, in 1995, it was the turn of a new wave of former Communist countries, the democratisation of which had been difficult or incomplete: Albania, Latvia (after it had provided assurances regarding the rights of its Russian-speaking nationals), Moldova, Ukraine and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

Some admissions were delayed and made subject to conditions. Russia, a candidate since 1993, was not considered by jurists in the Council of Europe as being a constitutional state. However, France, Germany and the United Kingdom, in order to strengthen its ties with Europe, exerted pressure for it to be allowed to join. The Russian Federation was admitted in January 1996, in spite of the hardening of its attitude in the Chechen conflict and a failure to provide any real guarantees that it would respect human rights. The entry of Croatia became possible in November 1996 only after the implementation of tangible democratisation measures. Other candidate countries, not yet fulfilling the preconditions, were granted 'special guest' status, which allowed them to send delegations to the Parliamentary Assembly without having seats on the Committee of Ministers: Belarus (formerly Belorussia), Bosnia-Herzegovina (which was to be admitted in 2002) and the Yugoslav Republic. The same status was granted to the Caucasian republics before they were admitted: Georgia in 1999, Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2001. They were regarded as part of 'Greater Europe', unlike the Asian Republics of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

In this way, the Council of Europe found a new *raison d'être* becoming, as it did, a framework within which to welcome the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe. Its first summit of Heads of State or Government was held in Vienna, on 8 and 9 October 1993, formally to affirm its role in the consolidation of a democratic Europe following the collapse of the Communist regimes. In fact, the Council of Europe put in place several programmes to aid the development of institutions meeting Western standards as a reward for compliance with CSCE principles and the European Convention on Human Rights. In 1994, it drew up a Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, limiting itself to setting out principles and leaving it to each Member States to incorporate them into their legislation.

For the Eastern European countries, membership of the Council of Europe, albeit important in terms of political and legal principles, did not satisfy their desire for European integration. They considered the Council of Europe, therefore, as a sort of 'antechamber' for the European Community, which they clearly hoped to join very soon.