

The Eastern bloc in the throes of change

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The Eastern bloc in the throes of change

The political events and economic changes in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s radically altered the geopolitical situation in Europe and transformed existing institutions and structures. Aspirations to freedom, democracy and the defence of human rights, which had long been stifled by the authoritarian regimes of the Soviet bloc, were expressed more and more openly, thanks in particular to the reforms introduced in the Soviet Union by Mikhail Gorbachev and his policy of gradually opening up to the West.

Communist governments, already weakened, quickly collapsed, encouraging the reawakening of national and minority identities in the USSR's satellite states and then in the Soviet Union itself. Demonstrations and strikes in support of political and economic reform became increasingly frequent. The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 simply accelerated the removal of the communist regimes. After Poland and Hungary, authoritarian governments gave way to elected multi-party coalitions in Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), Romania and Bulgaria. The democratic revolutions also put an end to the Warsaw Pact and the Comecon centrally-planned economy system. The Soviet Union imploded and was unable to prevent the wave of national independence in the Baltic states and in most of the republics which constituted the USSR. In 1991, a group of conservative communists, fiercely opposed to the turn of events, mounted an unsuccessful coup to overthrow President Gorbachev. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), incorporating some of the former republics, replaced the old Soviet Union.

Whilst the break-up of the Soviet Union was relatively peaceful, the collapse of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia led to years of civil war that ended only with the intervention of the Western powers. In 1989, the Republic of Serbia announced its intention of creating a 'Greater Serbia' that would include the Serb minorities in Croatia, Bosnia and Macedonia. When Croatia and Slovenia declared independence in 1991, they were brutally repressed by the largely Serb Yugoslav federal army. The European Community at first declared a preference for the continuation of the Yugoslav Federation, which had been linked to the European Economic Community (EEC) by a cooperation agreement since 1980. The Twelve, divided, had to call on the United Nations and the United States, and they played the leading role in the Yugoslav crisis. However, the European Union regained some measure of cohesion with the adoption of an action plan for the former Yugoslavia initiated by France and Germany in November 1993. The war in the former Yugoslavia was a test of the common foreign and security policy (CFSP) laid down in the Treaty on European Union. It also highlighted the inadequacies of an independent military capability, although it was the European Union that provided most of the humanitarian aid.