

## Statement by Bronislaw Geremek on the Council of Europe's role in unifying the continent (24 June 1998)

**Caption:** As a defender of human rights and the rule of law, the Council of Europe has made a significant contribution to nurturing the aspirations held by civil society in the Eastern bloc countries to adopt these same prerogatives.

**Source:** Geremek, Bronislaw, Le rôle du Conseil de l'Europe dans l'unification du continent. [EN LIGNE]. [Strasbourg]: Conseil de l'Europe, [21.12.2007]. Disponible sur <http://www.coe.int/t/f/multimedia/son/b17geremek.asp#TopOfPage>.

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## The Council of Europe's role in unifying the continent

The approach to the Council of Europe from behind the Iron Curtain was somewhat different from the one practised in the Western world. There, at a certain stage the Council of Europe became almost an ordinary institution, an institution proclaiming respect for democracy, human rights and rule of law, but appearing in its Western context as a monument without a definite purpose. Then in 1989 the other Europe's awakening to freedom completely altered the situation. The whole of Europe suddenly realised this institution's potential importance thanks to its proclamation and its philosophy of human rights and rule of law, the concept of democracy, and also the body of conventions in its keeping. But for we others in the other Europe, for the democratic opposition in the countries of central and eastern Europe, the Council of Europe was precisely the institution that presented us with something like a Sèvres porcelain figure of European freedom, and it can be said that this was our dream. This time, however, the dreams had some substantial content.

In surveying the long history of the Council of Europe, it must be realised that the Council's philosophy of action was built up over decades and that the Council of Europe acquired its full lustre and its magnificent potency after 1989 through the encounter with the mighty human aspiration of the peoples of the other Europe.

The Council of Europe did not accept the 1989 elections as democratic - with good cause, because the elections on that occasion were more contractual than democratic. Not until after the 1991 elections did the Council of Europe decide that Poland had achieved an adequate threshold of political maturity.

I consider it very difficult to see how this concept of human rights can be given real and definite substance. To my mind, the solution hinges on the idea of civil society. When we say civil society, it is not quite certain what we are talking about. Institutions, yes. The Council of Europe has its Secretary General and administration; the telephone number is obtainable. But the telephone number and the directory listing of civil society are hard to find. In fact civil society is the citizen taking part in public affairs, knowing his rights and how to fight for them, and it is also the non-governmental organisations.

At the time of Communist rule, civil society was a way of saying, "All right, they hold power but we are society and as such we organise ourselves outside all the power structures."

I believe that the Council of Europe is most fortunate in possessing the complete legal language of respect for human rights in conventions and in the Court of Human Rights. The Strasbourg Court lends a certain force to the concept of human rights and to the entire action of the Council of Europe, and so this legal language is united with the social action directed at creating civil society, local initiatives and non-governmental organisations. This is the context where the Council of Europe would find a place in the networks of European institutions upholding the cause of peace in Europe. War is so remote from us that we tend to forget the true role of this entire framework: securing peace.