

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 at the end of the 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 identities and minorities 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 further 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 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 making up 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. 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.