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ROUNDTABLE

German Unification and the Political Order - Thirty Years Later¹

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Keywords

German unification, non-violent revolution, East Germany, collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, European integration, NATO, question of German sovereignty

Article history

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Editor's note

The history of the post-war division of Germany marks an important point of reference for inter-Korean politics. Both, South Korean president Roh Tae-woo's Nordpolitik starting in 1988 and president Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy (The Reconciliation and Cooperation Policy Towards the North) of 1998 seem to have been directly inspired by West German Chancellor Willy Brandt's so-called Neue Ostpolitik (New Eastern Policy) based on Egon Bahr's concept of Wandel durch Annäherung (change through rapprochement), an early and perhaps decisive step in the de-escalation of the Cold War. Today, the peaceful transition of East Germany toward democracy and the subsequent German unification continue to provide a hopeful historical example that peace and reconciliation on the Korean peninsula may be attainable.

Introduction

The years 1989 and 1990 are commonly recognized as a turning point in German history, usually a turn to the better. The protests by East German citizens which contributed to the collapse of the East German dictatorship are remembered today as a *peaceful revolution*, mostly with approval and respect, sometimes even admiringly so. The unification of the two German states – a process which largely took place according to the West German model – is discussed in more differentiated terms: not everyone endorses the way it was done. Hardly anyone, however, argues that Germans would be better off if the two German states had remained divided. Usually the story of the peaceful revolution and of German reunification is told in terms of national history, as a central part of recent German history. In the following text, I seek to emphasize the international and transnational dimensions of this process and show how they interacted with domestic developments. I proceed in three steps: First, I shall speak about developments up until the end of 1989 (1). Secondly, I consider the year 1990, which saw the negotiation of a new political order, both within Germany as well as internationally (2). Finally, I focus on some consequences that these truly remarkable decisions and events had in the long run (3).

1. Exit from Communism: the Collapse of the GDR

Telling the story of the so-called East German peaceful revolution of 1989 should start by turning one's focus toward Moscow, Warsaw and Budapest. In

1. This text is an edited version of a keynote speech given at the 2020 KDIS-FUIKS Korea-Europe Center Inauguration Conference hosted by the Korea Europe Center (KEC), Berlin, on 16 November 2020.

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2. On the question of international, allied, and mutual recognition of the two German states in the post-war era see, for example, Ryszard W. Piotrowicz: *The Status of Germany in International Law: Deutschland über Deutschland?* In: *The International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (Jul., 1989), pp. 609-635.

3. Albert O. Hirschman: *Exit, Voice, and the Fate of the German Democratic Republic*. In: *A Propensity to Self-Subversion*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1995, pp. 9-43.

4. SED, the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (Socialist Unity Party of Germany), the governing political party in East Germany.

5. Socialism with a human face is a phrase associated with the reformist agenda of Alexander Dubček launched by the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in April 1968 that included moderate democratic reforms, economic decentralization, and political liberalization. As such, it played a key role in the so-called Prague Spring, a period of nationwide mass protests, increasing anti-Soviet polemics, and political liberalization between January and late August 1968. It was eventually stopped by military intervention and the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops on 20-21 August 1968.

the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev had been elected General Secretary of the Communist Party in 1985. Gorbachev started far-reaching political reforms aiming to increase economic productivity, enliven the public sphere, and make politics a bit less hierarchical. From 1988 to early 1989, reformers in Poland and Hungary managed to introduce a number of liberal and democratic elements into their hitherto hierarchical-authoritarian political systems. These included relatively free elections and a certain degree of national autonomy, albeit without leaving the Soviet bloc altogether. It also became increasingly clear that, in contrast to previous decades, the Soviet government had no longer any intention to intervene in the Eastern bloc countries under their influence, least of all by military force, in order to protect the communist structures of Central and Eastern European regimes against internal challenges and preclude even moderate steps of liberalization.

The *German Democratic Republic* (GDR) had a singular status among the Eastern bloc countries due to the fact that there existed a neighbouring country of one and the same nationality, but this country belonged to the Western bloc. The *Federal Republic of Germany* (FRG) in the West was much larger a country and far more successful economically. For attentive East Germans, it represented a permanent frame of reference and comparison, for the East German government it was a political adversary who never fully accepted the post-war division of Germany and only tolerated the existence of the GDR.² This was evident, for example, in West German citizenship law which dealt with *German* citizenship and granted full citizenship status to *all* Germans, including East German citizens under GDR jurisdiction, so that whenever they made it across the fortified border, no process of *de jure* naturalization was required: a standing invitation to do so.

In the fall of 1989, after years of economic decline, failed reforms, and growing popular dissatisfaction, East Germans – informed by West German television and radio broadcasting – were well aware of the developments in Moscow, Hungary and Poland. They understood that the Soviets were loosening their grip and East Germans reacted with an interplay of exit and voice (Albert Hirschman³) bringing down the communist regime led by Erich Honecker in less than three months.

At first, a wave of mass migration to the West set in, particularly after the Hungarian government had opened the Hungarian-Austrian border on September 11, 1989. Through this crack in the Iron Curtain, East Germans moved en masse into Austria and, from there, on to the Federal Republic of Germany, twenty-five thousand of them in the very first night alone. This well publicized mass exodus not only further challenged the legitimacy of the East German regime but also weakened it economically. At the same time, an increasing number of the many East Germans who stayed behind started to make themselves heard. Small groups of dissidents had existed prior to these events including intellectuals, artists, church people, peace and environmental activists among others. Now these groups became more visible, grew in size and multiplied. New reform groups were set up by East Germans who became politically engaged for the first time in their lives. To some extent, they did also cooperate with the few reformers within the party ranks of the *SED*.⁴

Mikhail Gorbachev's visit to the GDR in early October accelerated these processes, setting off a sequence of non-violent demonstrations demanding reforms, freedom to travel, more consumer goods, *socialism with a human face*,⁵ and democratization. These demonstrations did not demand national unification nor,

of course, capitalism. At first, they were small and cautious and met with partial but not total repression. They were supported by church prayers and sustained by much civil courage. However, by late October and early November 1989, demonstrations had grown to the scale of several hundred thousand participants each, particularly so in Leipzig, Dresden and later also in East-Berlin. The East German regime did in fact consider violent counter measures: tanks, prisons and hospitals stood ready by early October. Everyone in the streets was aware of what had happened on Tiananmen Square in Beijing the previous June, but miraculously – as it was perceived at that time – police violence remained rather limited, and the *Nationale Volksarmee*, the East German armed forces, was not called into action.

Under the combined pressures of mass exodus and mass demonstrations, faced by imminent economic collapse, and without the prospect of help by their Soviet protector, the self-confidence of East German rulers quickly evaporated. They were irritated by the developments in Gorbachev's Soviet Union, in Poland and Budapest. The SED fragmented, leaders retired or had to step down, and the regime became increasingly chaotic.

In the evening of November 9, the Berlin Wall that had hermetically separated East from West Berlin was opened by East German authorities. Although this happened partly due to a mistake in communication within the confused *nomenclatura* (members of the Communist Party in key administrative positions), it was irreversible without considerable coercion and violence, both of which the rulers were not prepared to risk. Large numbers of East Berliners flooded West Berlin, met relatives and friends, had a close look at the temples of consumerism which for so long they had glanced at only from distance, they danced in the streets and even on the wall, celebrated – and went home. These were days of great public emotions. These were decisive steps towards bringing the communist government down, although, at the time, it remained completely unclear to what kind of alternative political and social structure this would lead.

Shortly after, Czechoslovakia, Romania and Bulgaria managed and experienced their *exits* from communism, comparable yet different in form. Clearly, the 1989 East German peaceful revolution was an integrated part of a broader East European development. What then defined the exit from communism in East Central Europe? What did the ruptures of 1988/89 in the six Central and Eastern European countries have in common?

First of all, they strongly influenced each another. It was like a domino game. Once communist leaders started falling in one place, their legitimacy elsewhere was severely reduced. Here lies the outstanding importance of Hungary and Poland, who were first in line. They served as examples, contagious ones at that.

Everywhere change was systemic, that is, the former communist countries simultaneously experienced changes in the political system, in the economic order, in social processes and their dominant ideologies – breaking away from communism, moving toward more liberal-democratic, constitutional forms of government, toward market economies and more open, less centralized societies, with greater individual freedom. It is this systemic character, in addition to the sheer speed of developments, which perhaps would justify to label these changes *revolutionary*, particularly so in Germany and Czechoslovakia.

The crowds and activists of 1989 detested violence and largely managed to stay non-violent (with the exception of Romania). Their pacifist quality was remarkable, tactically shrewd, indeed, it was based on conviction – understandable against the background of the excesses of violence in this part of the world

6. The Helsinki Declaration was the third and final phase of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) also known as the Helsinki Process. It constituted a key element of détente during the Cold War and aimed to minimize political and military tensions between the Eastern Bloc and Western Bloc countries. The CSCE and the Helsinki Process laid the foundations for the later Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in post-Cold War Europe.

7. Perestroika (reconstruction) and glasnost (openness or transparency) were key political slogans of Gorbachev's movement for internal reform of Soviet Communist Party and the restructuring of the Soviet political and economic system between 1985 and 1991. Gorbachev, under the policy of glasnost, also encouraged a certain level of bottom-up, popular scrutiny and criticism of government institutions by ordinary citizens.

during the first half of the twentieth century. These were remembered as an experience to be avoided at any rate. It is equally remarkable that, when the Eastern Bloc collapsed and the governing Communist elites stepped down, this happened without being accompanied by violence or civil war. Coercive means were available to the regimes, but police units and armed forces remained largely undeployed. Most European communist dictatorships of the late 20th century collapsed without much violent resistance. They imploded, so to speak, without having to be vanquished in bloody civil wars.

In each of these cases, the quest for national identity and autonomy served as a significant factor of change, directed against the supra-national Soviet empire. The turning point of 1989 reconfirmed, restored, and reestablished the principle of the nation-state across the whole of Europe. However, the language used for justifying political change frequently also pointed toward levels beyond the nation or the nation-state. *Europe* and *Returning to Europe* served as positive code words for many activists, and *European values* were frequently cited including individual rights, civic obligations, the freedoms of expression and movement. Europe could be readily associated with free-market economy, with civil society, or just with a conventionally modern, desirable way of life. The mirror image to communism of the post-war decades was not capitalism, but rather Europe.

Finally, the sudden systemic change-over in the Central Eastern European countries was being propelled by a similar set of underlying causes. Nearly everywhere throughout the Eastern Bloc, economic stagnation or decline took place during the 1980s effecting growing popular dissatisfaction. And although the media allowed self-comparison with the West, particularly so in the GDR, there was still much Cold War ideological rivalry between East and West during the 1970s and 1980s. Some policies of détente, however, were successful, for example the *Helsinki Declaration* of August 1, 1975.⁶ The signing of the Helsinki Declaration by all of the Eastern Bloc countries (except Albania) made it increasingly difficult for the communist regimes to depict their capitalist neighbours as threatening enemies. This strategy had been a source of system legitimization in previous decades but generational change within GDR elites also played a role as a result of which mentalities started to alter.

The perhaps singular most important cause behind the profound changes during the year 1989, however, was related to General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, Mikhail Gorbachev. Not that he openly urged party leaders and dissidents from Berlin to Sofia to push for reforms. Rather, his own course of reformation – *glasnost* and *perestroika*⁷ – served as a model for oppositional groups in the satellite countries of the Eastern Bloc. At the same time, it became increasingly clear to party leaders that the Soviet Union had to reduce economic subsidies to its satellites, for example the supply of crude oil below world market price, because it could simply not afford this kind of generosity any longer – being economically weakened and needy herself. And most importantly perhaps, it became clear that the Soviet Union under Gorbachev would no longer intervene, certainly not militarily as it had done during the Prague Spring, to protect its satellite regimes against internal opposition, even if this challenged basic communist principles. Without Soviet protection and military backing, the Central and East European regimes were deprived of their most forceful means for defending themselves against the growing pressures for internal reform.

With his reform policies, Gorbachev tried to counteract and reverse the deep crisis that had set in during the Brezhnev era and continued to harden under

the leadership of Andropov and Chernenko. The Soviet Union also faced an expensive arms race with the United States, strategically deployed by the Reagan administration to further weaken the Soviet economy. An economy that was already suffering, indebted, and underdeveloped in many ways. As a state-directed, centrally planned, non-market economy, it may have produced satisfactory results in previous decades: building railroads, exploiting coal mines and running steel mills during an earlier phase of industrialization. But it was substantially lagging behind in the period of the electronic revolution, innovations in information technology and network societies. By the 1980s, economic decline was severely endangering the communist order. To make matters worse, the Soviet Union also suffered a humiliating military defeat in Afghanistan and, as a result, had started to withdraw its troops in mid-May 1988. Through his reform agenda and by letting the periphery go, Gorbachev had hoped to preserve the Soviet system's core as well as its principles. This constituted, as it turned out, a miscalculation. However, at the time, this strategy reflected very real constraints and issued in events of world historical consequence.

2. The new political order negotiated: the year 1990

As a direct consequence of the revolutionary changes effecting the breakdown of communism throughout Central Eastern Europe during the years 1988 to 1989 – albeit without much, if any, direct influence from the West – not only the German political order but that of Europe as a whole had to be restructured. This process largely took place during the year 1990.

In East Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, the topic of national unification moved gradually to the foreground, and West Germans stepped up to become major actors in the process. Throughout large-scale demonstrations in East German cities, calls for reunification with Western Germany became more frequent and more urgently articulated than had been the case during the initial phases of the uprising. They soon would come to define the majority mood, albeit in marked contrast to the preferences of the dissident intellectual leaders and political activists of the opposition who continued to push for the thorough democratization of the East German state. At that time, they also still favoured the continuance of the GDR as a separate democratic-socialist state, independent and distinct from capitalist-bourgeois West Germany. However, this soon evolved into a minority position and a majority of East Germans preferred reunification, a merger with the *Bundesrepublik* (Federal Republic of Germany). This shift happened during the first three months of 1990.

At that time, East Germans were already free to travel and their exodus in increasing numbers to West Germany became even more pronounced than during the last months of the previous year, amounting to an additional existential threat for the East German economy which had already been faltering for some time. The GDR went bankrupt, having been caught in a debt trap since the early 1980s worsened by declining Soviet economic and financial aid, and her leaders sought help from the West German government.

In the beginning of the East German uprisings during October and November 1989, direct West German influence had been marginal. In 1990, West German protagonists became decisive in shaping the future developments in the GDR. The issue of national unification was met with differing responses by the West German media, political parties, interest groups, and ordinary citizens, the majority of whom tended to support the goal of unification, albeit with different degrees of enthusiasm. Free elections were held in the still existing GDR in

March 1990, for the first time in more than forty years. In these elections a majority of East Germans made it clear that they preferred unification with West Germany as soon as possible, even at the price of abiding to West German terms. This meant a tremendous boost of recognition – a victory in a certain sense – for the West German FRG. The FRG was a highly successful capitalist economy, a functioning parliamentary democracy supported by a relatively lively civil society and much support in the international field. In other words: the GDR's shortcomings strongly contrasted with FRG's successes and it was in this way that many contemporaries both in the East and in the West perceived the situation in late 1989 and early 1990.

Against this background, it is understandable that the process of national unification would turn out to be asymmetric, that it would take place under West German leadership following West German principles rather than being negotiated between partners of equal standing. However, between Germans on both sides of the border, there still was much common ground left. Cross-border family relations and other contacts had outlasted the forty-year division of Germany, East Germans knew a lot about life in West Germany – most of them watched West German TV regularly, even if clandestinely – and, on the political level, both German states had not only closely observed each other but also competed with each other, and even developed some cooperation in the midst of tensions. Their common nationality – being German, speaking the same language, looking back at a long common history up to 1945 – provided a still shared cultural basis which most Germans on both sides could sufficiently identify with. On this basis, unification, when it became possible during the early 1990s, appeared as a natural course of action to commit to or, at the very least, to accept.

Without a doubt, there was much uncertainty, public debate and controversy during the first months of the year 1990. It was not only necessary to find some kind of common ground between East Germans and West Germans. It was even more important to devise a road map which would neither be blocked by the Soviet Union, nor by the United States, Great Britain and France, all of whom still held basic powers over both German states in 1989/90 and had done so since the defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945. Neither the FRG in the West nor the GDR in the East were fully sovereign states. Domestic decisions had to be aligned with allied preferences. And most neighbours of the two German states were not at all enthusiastic about the perspective of a reunified, economically strong and fully sovereign German state.

On both sides there were voices who advocated unification, but wanted to achieve it by – first – terminating the GDR *and* the FRG in order to – in a second step – create a new state, a united Germany on the basis of a newly framed constitution and a popular referendum. This strategy would have required much time and preparation, could have resulted in unpredictable outcomes and ultimately did not manage to find majority support. It failed, mainly because of the tremendous momentum being generated in the East German mass movements, due to the pressures resulting from the failing East German state, but also because of the singular determination in pushing for unification of West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. Driven by events on the ground, unification turned out asymmetric and speedy in implementation. There were, it is true, negotiations between representatives from both the FRG and the GDR who framed treaties which were ratified by the elected parliaments of both states. But in essence, unification was designed as the accession of the GDR to the FRG

and the extension of the field of application of the Federal Republic's Basic Law to the territory of East Germany. However, it was already in the summer of 1990 – months before the actual legal and constitutional act of unification took place – that the economic and social union was concluded: a single market, a single currency (the West German *Deutsche Mark*), a single system of social protection. In October 1990, the constitutional and political union followed: one constitution, one legal system. For the West Germans, their country's name, flag, national anthem and most of their everyday life stayed the same – while nearly everything changed for the East Germans. There was much continuity between the *old* FRG (one of two German states) and the *new* FRG: essentially the West German system had been enlarged, absorbing the GDR which, in consequence, ceased to exist.

All this, however, depended on the acceptance of German unification by the major powers in the international arena. This acceptance was gained in a complicated diplomatic process, between November 1989 and September 1990.

International resistance against German unification played an important role from the beginning. Already in January 1990, Gorbachev had realised that the Soviet Union was no longer able to control the tumbling East German state. More importantly, Gorbachev had stated that it was up to the Germans themselves to decide on the future of Germany including the issues of unification. The leaders of some western powers, especially of Britain, France and Italy, had quietly counted on Gorbachev's stiff resistance against German unification – which they did not favour. Now they had to follow suit. They realised that they could not halt the dynamic process which was already on the way and that received so much backing by the East German people's movement, by the West German and East German government, but also by Washington, a steady supporter of German unification.

The Poles and other East Central Europeans were ready to accept German unification as soon as Germany would finally accept the geography and the legitimacy of her eastern borders, which had emerged after World War II and which had so far not been fully recognised by the West German government. This recognition now took place and German unification was accepted by all neighbouring states.

However, other questions ensued: How would German unification impact on the future of European integration? Would a unified and more powerful Germany prove to be more ambitious and potentially disrupt the balance of power which had made the European Community possible? These questions could be resolved only by satisfying the French government of François Mitterrand that a reunified Germany would pose no risk to French fiscal and economic interests on the national level nor block the establishment of the European Monetary Union and the creation of a common European currency favoured by Paris on the level of the European Economic Community (EEC). In previous years, the German government had been supportive of this plan as a major step towards deepening European integration, but it should only take place *after* achieving greater convergence among the member states in economic and financial policy respects. But in 1990, the Germans aligned themselves with the French and agreed to go ahead with creating a common European currency without keeping up their insistence on prior convergence. The British government, on the contrary, did not approve and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher remained sceptical, in this as in other respects. But for most European governments German unification became acceptable because they acted on the assumption that the

increased size and power of a reunited Germany would be counterbalanced by Germany's closer integration into the institutional framework of the European Community. European integration thus facilitated German unification – perhaps even made it possible – while German unification, in turn, provided an additional push to the advancement of European integration.

The most controversially discussed question concerned the future security architecture of Europe. One position in this debate held that, since the Cold War between East and West was coming to an end, NATO, in consequence, had become less necessary and even been rendered anachronistic. What was needed instead were new treaties, a new pan-European security structure which would include the Soviet Union and, preferably, cover the whole area from the Atlantic in the west to Vladivostok in the east. This idea, however, remained vague, its supporters differing considerably in detail. Gorbachev favoured this perspective. He saw it as a way to facilitate the necessary reforms within the Soviet Union. François Mitterrand was also sympathetic to the idea and in West Germany, foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher also flirted with similar ideas.

Contrary to such bold a departure from the status quo, others strongly advocated for the centrality of a strengthened NATO as a mechanism for granting stability to the transatlantic region and for securing peace in the future. They demanded that the united Germany would be free to join NATO if it chose to do so. This was the policy of the US under the George Bush administration, a position which soon gained full support by German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. Others found this solution appealing because Germany's integration into NATO structures was also seen as an effective way to exercise control over a united Germany in military and strategic terms. This second position finally prevailed and NATO continued to exist, certainly also because it provided the US with an instrument for maintaining and securing American influence in post-Cold War Europe. As a solution, it emphasized continuity rather than a new departure and as such carried the stamp of the Bush administration's conservative realism in foreign affairs.

To the surprise of many at the time, Gorbachev accepted NATO membership of a unified Germany, even if grudgingly so. The Soviets did not even receive a clear assurance that NATO would not extend its reach further into the east. This fact again shows how weak the bargaining position of Gorbachev and the Soviet Union actually was during those decisive months. Gorbachev faced opposition at home, was increasingly alarmed by the beginning disintegration of the Soviet Empire and had to operate under the severe pressures of a worsening economic crisis and its imminent threat of bankruptcy. The Soviet government badly needed financial aid and it certainly greatly facilitated the process that the German Chancellor Kohl could offer to Gorbachev considerable financial support in hard German currency during these months. Wealthy West Germany granted aid amounting to roughly forty to seventy billion Euros in present day value.

3. Looking back after thirty years

Looking back on the settlements of the year 1990 with the hindsight of thirty years, it indeed seems amazing how conservative they turned out in essence. Though both within Germany as on the European level new ideas and departures from the status quo were being discussed, they were ultimately rejected. The *new* Germany turned out an enlarged version of the old FRG. The security architecture of Europe after 1990 resembled the one before 1989 in its basic respects.

The United States of America were committed to Europe and remained a global power, both before and after the events of the years 1989/90. There was much overall continuity despite all the ruptures and fissures of these years.

Of course, these events produced losers. Inside Germany many former citizens of the GDR experienced hardship, unemployment, forced changes of their lives with little if any actual control over the course of events. They experienced new forms of dependence on and paternalism by the West. This has become a major point of criticism regarding the way West Germans designed the process of unification 30 years ago. It was a deeply asymmetric affair, engineered and conducted by the West, with the East Germans being reduced to recipients, passive objects, even second-class citizens. I believe this was – to some extent – unavoidable, but it created a new dimension of domestic inequality which, even today, continues to be much deplored, and in certain regards rightly so.

On the international level, the Soviet Union was the biggest loser of the events and it would disintegrate soon after. Gorbachev's bold reform strategy had largely failed in the Soviet Union, but it had opened a window of opportunity for German unification. I therefore see Gorbachev as a tragic figure. The new political order of the continent did not accommodate Soviet interests, nor, soon after, those of Russia. The new European and transatlantic order turned out to be too much centred on the West. It took ten to fifteen years in order for a re-strengthened Russia to emerge under Vladimir Putin and to question this post-Cold War settlement, resenting the extension of NATO and the European Union to the East, and to turn against the West – something which other strategic solutions in the year 1990 could perhaps have avoided.

But there were also many winners and tremendous gains. The political order of the unified Germany as framed in the year 1990 offered to its new citizens from the former GDR great benefits in terms of freedoms, life chances and standard of living compared to life in the GDR. The political order of 1990 has turned out to be an adequate long-term framework for the protracted process of economic, social and cultural unification. And this process is still ongoing even today. The political order of 1990 has also proven its worth as a framework for peaceful change and democratic conflict resolution. Compared with the dark history of Germany in the first half of the 20th century, the Federal Republic has been a success story, though not without its problems, deficits and challenges. This evaluation holds, I believe, both with respect to the old FRG before and the enlarged FRG after unification.

Looking back on these settlements, it may also be worthwhile to note that they were successful in avoiding worse alternatives. Many at the time feared that such fundamental changes like those of the period of 1989/90 would not take place peacefully, without ensuing war and human loss. This, however and happily so, was largely avoided. At the time, many also feared that an enlarged, unified and strengthened Germany would once again become a destabilising force, a troublemaker on the European scene, a centre of resurgent nationalism, and a potentially aggressive agent of power politics. This fear too proved unfounded.

In general terms, the changes of the years 1989/90 implied a renewed recognition of the strength of the idea of the nation state, which was also mirrored in the settlements. The post-Cold War political order as it was framed during the year 1990 opened up new opportunities and paved the way for the closer integration of Europe, which took up pace in the decades that followed. German unification and European integration, therefore, became not only compatible but also mutually reinforcing. For the Central and Eastern European states that won

back their national sovereignty, the European Union became an attractive focal point to which they could turn and did turn – albeit not without creating new problems for European integration, pressing as they are today.

The actors of 1989/90 were sufficiently skillful and prudent to avert catastrophic developments. In face of the catastrophic events in European history during the first half of the twentieth century, this is certainly something worth noting, something that commands our recognition and respect.

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