

PART I

POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY OF CONTEMPORARY EUROPE

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FOREWORD

After half a century of relative stabilisation, the turn of the 20th century brought significant changes on the political map of Europe.

The case of Poland – a country which, without changing its location in geographical space, had all its neighbours changed over 27 months (from 3 October 1990 to 1 January 1993) – is unprecedented in political history. From the end of the Second World War until 1992 Poland had only three neighbours (GDR, Czechoslovakia and the USSR), while after 1992 there were seven countries adjoining it (FRG, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania and Russia). Most of the geopolitical changes, aside from federalisation of Belgium, establishment of new autonomous regions in the United Kingdom and the gaining of sovereignty by Andorra, took place in Central, Eastern and Southern Europe, mainly as a result of the unification of Germany and disintegration of three federal states: Czechoslovakia, the USSR and Yugoslavia.

At the same time the system of political and military blocs dividing the world into the West (market economy and democracy) and the East (communist command-control economy and totalitarian regime) collapsed, which brought liquidation of so-called people's democracies in Europe. It has not been possible, though, to completely eliminate all elements of communism. In fact its only slightly transformed forms still persist in Belarus and the Dniester region, while all former communist states have some elements of this system left, although to a varying extent – the further to the east, the stronger the communist legacy.

The process of geopolitical transformations in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) which took place in the last decade of the 20th century and in the first decade of the 21st century was influenced by three events (catalysts). Two of them were external in relation to the region in question and one event was internal. Among the external factors, the communist putsch in Afghanistan and sending Soviet troops (25 December 1979) there must be regarded as a catalyst on the political level that initiated significant political problems of the so-called Eastern bloc. On the military and economic level, such a catalyst was the so-called Star Wars Programme announced by Ronald Reagan, the President of the

United States (28 March 1983). On the ideological-social level, a catalyst was election to the papacy of a Polish cardinal Karol Wojtyła (16 October 1978) and his first pastoral trip to Poland (2–10 June 1979) when he spoke the famous words:

And I cry – I who am the son of the land of Poland and who am also Pope John Paul II – I cry from all the depths of this Millennium, I cry on the vigil of Pentecost: Let your Spirit descend. Let your Spirit descend and renew the face of the earth, the face of this land!

The internal catalyst in the communist bloc of CEE which initiated transformations on political, economic and social levels was a strike in Gdansk Shipyard (*Stocznia Gdańska*) ended with establishing Self-Governing Trade Union ‘Solidarity’ (*Niezależny Samorządny Związek Zawodowy ‘Solidarność’*) (31 August 1980). As a result, martial law was introduced by the communist authorities after sixteen months of freedom (13 December 1981).

Table 1 shows the dynamics of geopolitical transformations in Europe in the period 1989–2011.

Table 1. Changes of political structures during 1989–2011 in Europe

1989		2010	
States 1	Autonomous units 2	States 3	Autonomous units 4
Polish People’s Republic		Republic of Poland	
German Democratic Republic		Federal Republic of Germany	Mecklenburg-Vorpommern
			Brandenburg
			Saxony-Anhalt
			Saxony
			Thuringia
	West Berlin		Berlin
Czechoslovak Socialist Republic	Czech Socialist Republic	Czech Republic	
	Slovak Socialist Republic	Slovak Republic	
Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR)	Lithuanian SSR	Republic of Lithuania	
	Latvian SSR	Republic of Latvia	
	Belorussian SSR	Republic of Belarus	
	Ukrainian SSR	Ukraine	Autonomous Republic of Crimea
			Sevastopol – Russian leasing
	Moldavian SSR	Republic of Moldova	Gagauzia (Gagauz Yeri)
		Transnistrian Moldavian Republic	
Russian Federal SSR	Russia – Russian Federation	Region of Kaliningrad	

Table 1 (cont.)

1	2	3	4
Hungarian People's Republic		Republic of Hungary	
Bulgarian People's Republic		Republic of Bulgaria	
Socialist People's Republic of Albania		Republic of Albania	
Socialist Republic of Romania		Republic of Romania	
Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia	Socialist Republic of Slovenia	Republic of Slovenia	
	Socialist Republic of Croatia	Republic of Croatia	
	Socialist Republic of Macedonia	Republic of Macedonia	
	Socialist Republic of Montenegro	Republic of Montenegro	
	Socialist Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina	Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina	Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina
			Republic of Srpska
			District of Brčko
	Socialist Republic of Serbia	Republic of Serbia	
	Socialist Autonomous Province of Vojvodina		Autonomous Province of Vojvodina
Socialist Autonomous Province of Kosovo	Republic of Kosovo	Region of Kosovska Mitrovica	

Source: the author's own analysis.

The intensity of political and administrative changes taking place in Europe at the turn of the 20th century calls for in-depth study of the nature of these phenomena. The editors of ESR&P decided to address these questions in a special issue entitled *Political Geography of Contemporary Europe*. It contains contributions dealing with geopolitical transformations in Europe as a whole and in its particular regions seen from the perspective of researchers from Italy, Israel, Poland and Slovenia. The authors of the contributions are mostly political geographers engaged in the study of geopolitical processes occurring on our continent.

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