

FALL 2019

Lessons from History

Europe and the fall of the Berlin Wall

EVENT REPORT



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How Europe can keep capitalising on the Berlin Wall's positive legacy

European Union integration has advanced significantly over the last 30 years, but the bloc's milestones also remind us how far we have to go. This key conclusion emerged during 'Europe and the fall of the Berlin Wall', the third debate in the 'Lessons from history' series, organised in Brussels by Friends of Europe on 13 November 2019. It featured three experts who witnessed this momentous event, when thousands of East

Germans crossed peacefully into the West as border guards stood aside, bringing to an end the 44-year division of a sovereign country. The debate explored lessons learned and the international response, as well as recommendations for strengthening the European project against the backdrop of global uncertainty.

"The Wall's demise in November 1989 led to German reunification, heralded the Cold

War's end and suggested Western democracy was all-powerful," noted the moderator Jamie Shea, Senior Fellow, Friends of Europe and former deputy assistant secretary-general at NATO. Yet initial euphoria about a positive new world faded, followed at times by a sense of disillusionment, as Europeans grasped the huge challenge of uniting their continent both politically and economically.

Nostalgia for better times?

Why has the 30th anniversary of the end of the Wall attracted more attention than its previous major anniversaries? Shea offered up two possible explanations. Now that three decades have passed, it's easier to have a clear perspective. Secondly, in today's complex and polarised world, nostalgia is growing for apparently simpler and more inspiring times in Europe – prefigured in the 1980s by the rise of Solidarność, Poland's anti-communist trade union movement. To Western Europeans, it seemed as though the world was changing for the better, once without violence and with democratic values taking ascendancy over dictatorships in Central and Eastern Europe.

“ People on both sides made choices – including courageous demonstrations in East Berlin and other Central and Eastern European countries

Stefanie Babst, head of the Strategic Analysis Capability in the Emerging Security Challenges Division (ESCD) at NATO

On the other hand, today Russia is obviously not willing to follow the same path of closer partnership with Europe. Transatlantic relations have grown frostier, with the United States persistently calling for the EU to stand on its own two feet and to pull its weight more within NATO. China has grown more authoritarian, despite a brief wobble in 1989 after the pro-democracy protests in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. As one debate participant later noted, on the basis of Germany's reunification in the 1990s, Chinese authorities may have concluded that democracy movements are dangerous for governments.

Panellists considered the legacy of the Berlin Wall's fall, including Europe's political and economic progress and mistakes, plus the remaining challenges of authoritarianism worldwide. Everyone agreed that civil society played a major role in bringing down the Berlin Wall. "Its fall stemmed from unpredictable human agency. People on both sides made choices – including courageous demonstrations in East Berlin and other Central and Eastern European countries," said **Stefanie Babst**, head of the Strategic Analysis Capability in the Emerging Security Challenges Division (ESCD) at NATO.

When the Berlin Wall came down on 9 November 1989, it appeared to occur quickly and without warning. Yet the event was less surprising than some people now think. Babst and fellow panellists argued this event began with the USSR's liberal reforms two years earlier, introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev. These reforms ultimately bankrupted the Soviet state and loosened the ties with many of its Central and Eastern Europe satellite states – notably Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

The Wall's fall epitomised the law of unintended consequences, opined **Radosław Sikorski**, Member of the European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Subcommittee on Security and Defence, and acting Chair of the Delegation for relations with the United States. "Moreover the demise of communism was predicted, including by myself, in an article published in January 1989!" Nevertheless, as Sikorski noted, the world witnessed other momentous events that year such as the launch of the internet – whose impact has arguably been more far-reaching than the Berlin Wall's fall – and the crushing of anti-government protesters in Tiananmen Square, China.

A minor or major milestone?

Shea highlighted Europe's indulgence in a "cult of commemorations", among them the D-Day landings. He wondered if the 30th anniversary commemoration of the Wall's fall will usefully advance democracy or empower European adversaries, given China's crackdown this year on protests in Hong Kong. "The centrifugal forces of Berlin opened the doors of opportunity," replied **Jackson Janes**, Senior Fellow at the German Marshall Fund and Emeritus of the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies at Johns Hopkins University, speaking via video-link from Washington DC. In his view, key European milestones, like the Wall's fall, provide pointers on how and where our leaders should push for further democratic change.

Casting his mind back to the 1990s, Janes reckoned that Europe was basking in a sense of freedom and hopes of expanding the European project. Today that confidence has slipped somewhat, as other countries and regions have accelerated their own development.

“Europe and the US must band together, solve our common problems, and recalibrate our social, economic and political governance systems

Jackson Janes, Senior Fellow at the German Marshall Fund and Emeritus of the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies at Johns Hopkins University

“Over the last 30 years, Europeans and Americans have realised how much they depend on one another. But we need new answers to questions about how, where, when and why the two sides of the Atlantic still need each other,” added Janes. “Europe and the US must band together, solve our common problems, and recalibrate our social, economic and political governance systems.” He was against taking the easy path of looking inwards, as has happened under Trump in the US and through Brexit in the UK.

Panellists welcomed the EU’s enlargement from 12 to 28 member states in the years since 1989. Moreover Germany is a thriving and democratic part of the EU, despite some nearby nations’ initial yet unfounded fears about German reunification and a possible return to the war-like ways of the first half of the 20th century. “My home nation Poland, a former member of the Communist bloc like East Germany, also enjoyed a peaceful transition to democracy and has turned out well since joining the EU and NATO,” said Sikorski.

“Economics really matter and communism was a failure of economics,” added Sikorski. As proof, Poland has enjoyed growing prosperity within the EU: typical Polish wages now stand at 70% of the bloc’s average, compared with just 35% three decades ago.

Beware international blind spots

Despite this optimism, Sikorski warned that the EU is not working well as a confederation, as this has made the EU unstable. The current system has resulted in a Eurozone crisis, migration woes, and a weakened European defence and security sector. His recommendations included finding sufficient political will to complete European integration, “fixing capitalism” in the bloc – for example by retrieving the €30tn hidden in offshore accounts, and getting France and Germany to strike a grand bargain. “Europe must lead the way and not become a theme park or just a subcontractor of the United States or China,” he added.

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Panellists said that reunifying Germany could take another generation, mirroring the struggle for integration among EU countries. They also acknowledged that high unemployment and the rise of the Far Right and populism in former areas of East Germany stemmed in part from slow progress in completing that process.

Technology: a boon or bane for civil society?

When asked for their opinions on how new technologies and social media might be used, if the Berlin Wall still stood today, panellists were unsure if civil society would be helped or hindered. “Smartphones and social media were pivotal in the Arab Spring pro-democracy protests and uprisings, in the Middle East and North Africa, in 2010 and 2011,” Babst replied. Yet she admitted that some governments have clamped down on mobile and web technologies to prevent civil unrest within their borders. In other words, technology has blurred the lines between freedom of expression and malign intent.

An audience member underlined how technology had helped to turn the former East Germany into a surveillance state. However, in some respects, surveillance is worse and more common nowadays, due to the arrival of commercial and non-state actors that work alongside or independently of governments. For Babst, referring to the EU, one solution to this is to regulate technology companies.

What should the EU focus on now, as the Berlin Wall slips further into the rear-view mirror? “Let’s not jeopardise the last 30 years’ achievements,” concluded Jackson Janes. “Europe and its Transatlantic partners must restore trust in governance, rediscover their values and rejuvenate their democracies.”



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