How Do Europe's Cold War Divisions Persist?

East was East and West was West – until 1989. The Wall is gone, but are its Cold War demarcations still there?

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A street scene in Bucharest during the Romanian Revolution, 15-25 December 1989. Forteopan (CC BY-SA).

'The mistake is to assume that problems originate with communism'

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It is tempting to trace Europe's economic and political divisions back to the Cold War. Certainly, the brutality of the communist dictatorships left a poisonous legacy. Especially in the states that have successfully rebranded themselves as 'Central Europe', the wounds are gradually healing. Nevertheless, Europe's former communist countries tend to be poorer, with inferior infrastructure, declining populations and toxic political polarisation evident in even the most vibrant democracies.

The mistake, however, is to assume that these problems originate with communism. Generalisations about such a vast region are dangerous but it is striking that, before 1918, the eastern half of Europe was almost entirely governed by economically sluggish empires crippled by the inefficiencies of serfdom that only began to be abolished at the end of the 18th century. These empires were afflicted by low population density, limited urbanisation, a paltry middle-class and (tellingly) an awareness of backwardness that led to waves of heavy intervention from above. That was accompanied by a near-perpetual search for scapegoats, including ethnic minorities, an allegedly decadent aristocracy and/or rapacious bourgeoisie, as well as political opponents.

The grim legacy of the First World War produced a level of mass murder, displacement and economic destruction that had no significant comparison further west. From Hungary alone, in the first year after the war, around 100,000 people emigrated as a result of revolution and counter-revolution while a further half a million abandoned their homes and places of work due to changing borders. The interwar period made these problems worse. Almost all of the states of Central and Eastern Europe adopted some form of harsh authoritarian governance, with the exception of Czechoslovakia. Likewise, the depravities of the Second World War also had their epicentre on the Eastern front – notably the Holocaust, which destroyed Jewish communities that had formed a large part of the middle classes.

The Cold War dictatorships governed a region brutalised by both recent and distant history. Indeed, their appeal rested on the belief that they were the only viable way of closing the gap with Western Europe. That they proceeded to compound the damage should not mislead us into overlooking the deeper legacies that still shape Europe.

‘In their haste to reject communism, many states oversimplified the past’
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Cold War divisions in Europe persist in various ways, not all of which are immediately visible. NATO, created in 1949 as a bulwark against Soviet-backed communist expansion, is still with us even though the Warsaw Pact is long gone. The notion of ‘the West’ as an entity which joins together US and (Western) European interests has survived the end of the Cold War. The fact that communist regimes across East and Central Europe were not only overturned, but utterly discredited in the years between 1989 and 1991 led to profound change, some of the effects of which are only just beginning to be felt.

In the post-1989 race to join NATO and the European Union – understood by post-communist governments to be crucial to their states’ survival – new regimes across the former Eastern Bloc rewrote their official histories. But in their haste to reject communism, they oversimplified the past, often contradicting the experiences of their citizens. Where dominance by the Communist Party had once been a fact of life, Western Cold War notions of ‘opposition’ politics seldom fit. Nor did much self-consciously progressive Western thinking, from anti-racism to LGBTQ rights. Western liberals, shocked by some of the attitudes they encountered, resorted to explanations close to Marxist notions of ‘false consciousness’ to explain why, for example, the word *feminism* was scorned in so much of the former Eastern Bloc; why the Holocaust was not treated as central to the Second World War; and why nationalist rivalries seemed so intense and unforgiving. The experiences of those who had explicitly opposed communist regimes became central to official state narratives and national memory, as described in textbooks, documented on state television and celebrated in museums. Other attitudes could be heard on the streets.

Western liberal narratives, it seemed, offered the only politically acceptable pasts for states wishing to benefit from NATO or EU membership, or investment from Western firms, NGOs and charities. Those who had grown up in the East, with different experiences and expectations, saw their past written out of existence, treated as a wrong turning in history. The most significant legacy of the Cold War in Europe lies not so much in political structures as in attitudes, mentalities and memories.

‘The reorientation from Moscow to the West within one generation was revolutionary’
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Given the Soviet Union’s domination of Eastern Europe throughout the Cold War, the area’s reorientation from Moscow to the West within one generation was revolutionary. In Romania’s case, whereas Nicolae Ceauşescu had succeeded in uniting Romanians in opposition to him, his overthrow in December 1989 threw them into confusion. The legacy of totalitarian rule in Romania was thus markedly different from that elsewhere.

Although the Romanian Communist Party was declared dead in January 1990, no one produced a death certificate. Members of the Party merely swapped their cards for those of the ruling National Salvation Front and most of them carried on as if nothing had changed in political life. The NSF and its successor, the Social Democratic Party of Romania, showed reluctance to question the past. Only a few of those responsible for the bloodshed during the revolution in December 1989 were brought to trial. The anti-democratic instincts of those who grasped power saw them bus miners from the Jiu Valley to Bucharest in June 1990 with the task of restoring ‘democratic’ order, actions which bore all the hallmarks of tactics used by communist regimes across Europe.

But change did come. The country's first genuine democratic transfer of power came in 1996 when the neo-communists suffered defeat at the ballot-box. Possession of a passport became a right, not a privilege, and travel restrictions were removed. Ceauşescu's reviled abortion decree was rescinded. However, the rule of law was fragile. For Romanians, the words attributed to Balzac – 'laws are spider webs through which the big flies pass, and the little ones get caught' – felt particularly true.

The country's post-Cold War western vocation was signalled by its admittance to NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine (which began in 2014) Romania's geographic position has made her a key partner for the Euro-Atlantic structures, a fact confirmed by the US' decision to expand its Mihail Kogălniceanu airbase on the Black Sea. It will become the largest NATO base in Europe. Despite the end of the Cold War, countries like Romania still face a choice between Moscow and the West.

'The reorientation from Moscow to the West within one generation was revolutionary'
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Between 1989 and 1991 Europe peacefully left the Cold War behind. As the Soviet Union gave up its 'empire by imposition', mass protests were followed by electoral revolutions. The unification of Europe remains largely intact. Russia's war in Ukraine has prompted the Nordic neutrals, Finland and Sweden, to join NATO. In terms of its security architecture, Europe appears more cohesive than ever.

But politically Europeans are riven by rifts, both old and new. As the 2024 EU elections revealed, the continent is struggling with a paradoxical democratic divide. The far right won big in the old Western 'core' states: Germany, France and Italy, making gains in Austria and the Netherlands. It did less well in the Nordic and post-communist countries, such as Poland and Hungary. The latter had hitherto been a cradle of post-Wall populism which exploited disdain for 'post-national' Europe and the loss of 'sovereignty' – even if, in fact, Poles and Hungarians had been at the vanguard of throwing off the yoke of authoritarian communist regimes in 1989 after the Soviets had crushed the first rebellions in the 1950s. This is largely a result of the war in Ukraine; geographic proximity to a belligerent, imperialist Russia has rekindled historic fears, which in turn mobilised a pro-EU vote. In the West, notably France, a strong anti-immigration mood buoyed the nationalist right.

Germany's case is more complex. The Russophile right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD) came out on top in the eastern part of the country, despite the west pumping more than two trillion dollars into the east since the 1990s. By contrast, the moderate centre-right Christian Democrats overwhelmingly won in the West German Länder. Strikingly, many East Germans born after 1989 appear to have cast their ballot for the extreme right. This is more likely to be a result of historical amnesia than the Ostalgie imbibed by their grandparents.

Analysing Europe's political mood at large, the dominant factor is not the persistence of frozen Cold War divisions, but – exacerbated by social media – the rise of extreme political polarisation in an atmosphere of socio-economic uncertainty and international insecurity. Perhaps, too, Putin's territorial paranoia about encirclement harks back to Europe's feverish pre-1914 power politics, rather than the relative predictability of the Cold War.