



**Stefan Auer**

## Contesting the origins of European liberty

*The EU narrative of Franco–German reconciliation and the eclipse of 1989*

Despite western Europe's initially lukewarm response to the people's revolutions of '89, twenty years on the EU claims them as a cornerstone of "European identity". Yet historical gaffes have exposed the pitfalls in attempting to create an all too tidy narrative of Europe's twentieth century, writes Stefan Auer.

The European Union loves anniversaries. To the extent that the EU seeks to foster European identity, it is not surprising that it is increasingly deploying tools and methods that states used to create nations: commemoration of key moments in the nation's history served as rallying points for national attachments, creating or strengthening a sense of national identity.

Europe is different from nations. The European Union is not a state and Europe struggles to turn its history, or, to be more precise, its many histories, into one unifying narrative. From the outset, the European project was based on a somewhat paradoxical relationship with its past. Europeans were initially united more by what they rejected than that to which they aspired. In 1945, the great French poet, Paul Valéry, described the European predicament: "We hope vaguely, we dread precisely".<sup>1</sup> What people vaguely hoped for was peace, what they dreaded was the devastation of past wars. To find more positive sources of identification in their past, Europeans had to reach back further to the Enlightenment and its cosmopolitan ideals, which found expression in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with Schiller's *Ode to Joy*.<sup>2</sup> It is thus fitting that the EU adopted the tune of the Symphony's finale as its anthem in 1986.<sup>3</sup>

However successful the project of European unity has been in securing peace and prosperity underpinned by a strong commitment to liberal democracy, it was initially limited to western Europe. The collapse of communism enabled Europe to reach beyond these limitations. For the first time in their turbulent histories, the nations of Europe in the West and in the East could pursue unity together. The peaceful revolutions in central and eastern Europe gave the European Union a new set of images and a date to remember: 9 November 1989, the day on which the Berlin Wall lost its purpose.

One of the first public celebrations of this event was the performance in the Schauspielhaus Berlin (East Germany) of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony by a multinational orchestra with musicians from Germany, Russia, the UK, the US and France, and conducted by Leonard Bernstein. Responding to the spirit of the time — the concert took place only a few weeks after the demise of the wall — Bernstein felt justified in making a small but significant change to Schiller's lyric, substituting the word *Freiheit* (freedom) for *Freude* (joy). Ever

since, the liberation of 1989 and Beethoven's famous finale seem to have gone hand in hand as two positive symbols of European unity. The same music accompanied celebrations of the "big-bang" enlargement in May 2004, which brought eight countries from the former eastern Bloc into the EU, followed by the admission of Bulgaria and Romania in January 2007.<sup>4</sup>



The picture on Nicolas Sarkozy's official Facebook website, showing the then young politician chipping off parts of the wall. The revelation that Sarkozy actually only arrived in Berlin a few weeks later caused major embarrassment and was widely covered in the media worldwide.

Twenty years after the demise of communism, the EU has succeeded in giving itself a new institutional architecture through the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty. However, the new Europe of 27 member states needs more than new institutions: it requires a new self-understanding. Judging from a

number of recent attempts by key EU actors, achieving a basic agreement about the "meaning" of decisive events in Europe's recent past, including 9 November 1989, might prove at least as troublesome as the protracted process of institutional reform. The politics of identity is fraught with difficulties and the main aim of this paper is to show the limits of EU identity politics, with a particular focus on the legacy of 1989 in Poland, Germany and Europe at large.

### From Schuman to Maastricht: Europe Day and the European anthem

The Schuman Declaration of 9 May 1950 harks back to the legacy of World War II. The French Foreign Minister, Robert Schuman, was fully aware of the significance of its timing, "almost five years to the day since Germany's unconditional surrender", even though the actual release date of his plan was contingent on a series of negotiations between French, American and British partners.<sup>5</sup> The Declaration aimed at the preservation of peace in Europe by elevating West Germany into an equal partner in pursuit of a European federation, which was to be accomplished by means of piecemeal economic cooperation.

As Jean Monnet, the architect of the Schuman Plan, later recalled, in order to overcome traditional enmities between France and Germany, "the Franco-German problem" had to be turned into "a European problem".<sup>6</sup> From the very beginning, the project was open to other European nations with the notable exception of the countries under the Soviet sphere of influence. France and Germany were soon joined by Italy and the Benelux countries.

According to Fabrice Larat, one of the key aims of Europe Day, celebrated annually on 9 May in commemoration of the Schumann Declaration, was to reaffirm:

the continuity between the objectives introduced at that time in the Schuman Declaration (Franco-German reconciliation,

peace, stability, economical growth) and the basic principles of the European Union (willingness of the participating countries to restrict their own power, the abandoning of sovereign rights, and the rejection of nationalism).<sup>7</sup>

It is worth remembering that most contemporaries did not perceive the Schuman Declaration as a major event with far-reaching consequences. The fact that it is considered a milestone in Europe's integration nowadays is largely a testimony to the success of the European Commission and other EU institutions in making it so. Europe Day has been officially celebrated since 1985.

Yet, there are limitations to Europe Day as a symbol that unites all peoples of Europe. Unwittingly, it is also a reminder of the elitist and secretive nature of the project, at least originally. It remains one of the paradoxes of post-war European history that "the western part of Europe gained an institutional dimension through the European Coal and Steel Community in 1952 and the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1958 at precisely the time when a popular European feeling of community was at a low ebb".<sup>8</sup>

To protect peace in Europe, the peoples of Europe had to be protected from themselves: their fear and distrust of their neighbours, their desire for revenge. Owing to such sentiments, a peoples' Europe had to be built largely without people's knowledge. In the early stages of European integration, the project was indeed shaped by "Monnet's vision of the EEC as a technocratic creation that would bring about a thoroughly 'modernized' Europe created by an enlightened bureaucracy".<sup>9</sup> This did not pose any significant problems as long as the European project did not have much effect on the daily lives of citizens.

The post-war transformation of western Europe amounted to a "quiet revolution" of a peculiar kind.<sup>10</sup> This top-down revolution radically changed the relationship between nation-states by subordinating them to a supranational legal order, which was, however, created by distinctly moderate means. It was only in the 1980s and the 1990s that European elites owned up to these revolutionary changes and embarked on ambitious institutional reforms that culminated in the creation of the European Union. With the increased push towards closer integration through the Single European Act in 1986 and the Treaty of Maastricht in 1993, questions of legitimacy and popular consent gained importance, leading to a concerted effort to foster European identity.

Radical institutional changes in the 1980s and 1990s were thus accompanied by an increased focus on the politics of identity, with the introduction of a number of official symbols of European unification. As noted above, these included Europe Day, the European anthem and European citizenship. If the Schuman Declaration can be seen as a practical answer to the prevalent negative sentiment in Europe immediately after World War II ("never again war"<sup>11</sup>), the European anthem is the expression of the positive eighteenth-century ideal of the universal brotherhood of man. While the former seeks to foster European unity on the shared sense of revulsion at Europe's history marred by excessive violence, the latter seeks to achieve this by reminding Europeans of their Enlightenment heritage, embodied in the ideals of the French Revolution of 1789 (if not in its practice, which was also not free of violence).

European citizenship combines the pragmatic spirit of the Schuman Declaration with the cosmopolitan ideal expressed in the European anthem.<sup>12</sup> It is pragmatic in that it merely supplements, rather than substitutes, the existing national citizenship. Yet, by reminding Europe's citizens of rights they have as Europeans, particularly freedom of movement, European citizenship arguably enhances a sense of European identity.<sup>13</sup>

Almost at the same time as western Europe accelerated its "quiet revolution" from above, a bottom up revolution was taking place in central and eastern Europe. This took political elites in the West by surprise. The EEC and EU took a long time to develop an adequate response to a dramatically changed geopolitical situation. However, 20 years later, insofar as the EU wants to be seen as a "people's Europe", it seems to make sense for it to claim ownership of the "people's revolutions" of 1989.<sup>14</sup>

### **9 November 1989 from an EU perspective: Commemoration May–June 2009**

What better symbol could be found for a new Europe — one without borders and past enmities — than 9 November 1989, when the demise of the Berlin Wall marked the end of the post-war division of Europe? Having established an anthem and a Europe Day, it appears that the EU seeks to appropriate a new symbol capable of eliciting true affection — the fall of the Wall — with emotional images of people suddenly experiencing freedom. It was not just freedom of movement between one part of the city and another, but freedom from communist dictatorship that people celebrated on the streets of a reunited city, which was to lead to the reunification of Germany, and, eventually, the unification of the continent.

In May 2009, the audiovisual services of the European Commission released a three-minute long video to mark the "20th Anniversary of democratic change in central and eastern Europe" (official title). Its story is as simple as it is captivating. Against the background of an extremely brief recapitulation of key moments in the struggle against communism (Hungary 1956; Czechoslovakia 1968; Poland 1981; Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia 1989; Romania 1989), the short movie depicts a Europe without borders through the personal experience of someone born on that memorable day, 9 November 1989. Here is the storyline in more detail.

A baby boy was born at the very time when liberty was born in Berlin: liberty for Germany and the whole of Europe. Uplifting music underlines the young parents' joy over the newborn, reinforced through public joy over the fall of the wall (as can be seen on a TV screen in the maternity ward). As the boy learns to walk, the countries of the former Eastern bloc take their first steps towards national independence and freedom (Soviet troop withdrawal from Hungary in June 1991, Independence of Lithuania in November 1991). When the boy turns six, the small family drives for a holiday to France, experiencing the newly established Europe without borders ("Open borders", 1995). A 15-year-old boy celebrates the enlargement of the European Union ("Europe reunited", 2004). Finally, the 20-year-old, taking a photograph of the Brandenburg Gate, is ambushed by his friends who join him to celebrate his twentieth birthday.

Although this sanitized, politically correct depiction of birthday celebrations aimed to please everyone (somewhat implausibly, 20-year-olds chose to celebrate with a strawberry cake and soft-drinks!), it triggered a minor upheaval in the Polish media and on the pages of YouTube. From an EU

perspective the storyline made perfect sense. A lively and visually engaging production effectively assimilated the revolutions of 1989 into the established narrative of west European integration.

It is surely not accidental, for example, that the family chose France as its holiday destination. The choice reinforced the common understanding that at the centre of the European project was the process of Franco–German reconciliation, which turned both countries into reliable partners for each other and Europe at large. For a long time, France and Germany have indeed been seen as the engine of European integration. After the demise of communism in central and eastern Europe, it was expected that this model of reconciliation could be extended to the whole continent.

Yet, even as the movie celebrated a Europe without borders, which became reality through the Schengen Treaty in 1995, citizens from Poland and other countries of central and eastern Europe had to accept limitations on their freedom of movement. They could not work in Germany before 2011, for example, owing to a transitional measure that the old member states were allowed to apply to people from the new members states. France lifted its restrictions in July 2008, four years after the enlargement, having recovered from the somewhat paranoid fear of the "Polish plumber", which contributed to the defeat of the Constitutional Treaty in the 2005 referendum in France.<sup>15</sup>

### **Polish responses: "There is no freedom without Solidarity"**

From the Polish perspective, the timing of the video release could not have been worse. While the audiovisual services of the European Commission might have conceived it as a timely reminder of the fifth anniversary of enlargement (1 May 2004), Poles were about to celebrate the 20-year anniversary of the first semi-free elections on 4 June 1989. Just as that key Polish event was then largely overshadowed by more tragic and dramatic developments in China — the violent suppression of the pro-democracy movement in Tiananmen Square provided far more exciting media images — the EU video prefigured that in 2009 Poland's peaceful revolution was going to be overshadowed by the celebrations of the fall of the Berlin Wall. As a number of Polish commentators and politicians observed, Poland's contribution was reduced, in the EU video, to a few seconds of footage of General Jaruzelski reading the Martial law proclamation on 14 December 1981. There was no mention of Solidarnosc, or key personalities in the Polish struggle for liberty, such as John Paul II and Lech Walesa; and no reference to the round table discussions.<sup>16</sup>

Not surprisingly then, Polish political elites across ideological divides, journalists and people, were united in their rejection of the EU video. Roza Thun, the (then) head of the European Commission Representation in Poland, denounced it as an "idiotic error" (*idiotyczny blad*);<sup>17</sup> Bogdan Zdrojewski, Minister of Culture, as a "serious error" (*powazny blad*);<sup>18</sup> and Prime Minister Donald Tusk as a "stupid blunder" (*glupia wpadka*).<sup>19</sup> Poland's ambassador to the EU, Jan Tombinski, wrote a letter of complaint to Margot Wallström, the commissioner in charge of communication strategy, demanding the alteration of the video.<sup>20</sup> In a similar vein, Boguslaw Sonik, member of the European Parliament for Civic Platform (*Platforma Europejska*), wrote to the European Commission President José Manuel Barroso that "artistic licence cannot be more important than historical facts".<sup>21</sup>

Confronted with such a hostile reaction, the European Commission felt the need to respond, and released an amended version, which expanded on the footage of the Polish contribution, though it failed to satisfy most Polish commentators. In addition, the European Commission Representation in Poland in collaboration with the Office of the Committee for European Integration (UKIE) created a new video modelled on the original production but with a distinctly different focus. It was centred around a real person, Ms Marta Wloka, a Polish student of Lodz University who was born on 4 June 1989. It presented a day in the life of Ms Wloka alongside key moments in Polish post-communist history, including the country's entry into the European Union. The final scene shows Ms Wloka saying a simple *Dziękuję*, a "thank you", directed presumably to all those who brought about a free Poland in a free Europe.<sup>22</sup>

The controversy about the EU representation of 1989 is not a trivial matter; from a Polish perspective the depiction of freedom without Solidarity is not just incomplete, it is offensive.<sup>23</sup> Unwittingly, it also revives old traumas. It reminds Poles that when it mattered, the rise and fall of the Solidarity movement was not met with sufficient solidarity by leading politicians in western Europe, particularly in Germany. Similarly, in the immediate aftermath of the demise of communism in central and eastern Europe, west Europeans were preoccupied with western European integration and the unification of Germany, rather than the enlargement of the European Union. Furthermore, Polish citizens were not able to take full advantage of European citizenship even years after their accession to the EU, because of the transitional measures described earlier, which restrict freedom of movement in a number of west European countries.

To understand the intensity of Polish responses to the "20th Anniversary..." video, it is important to bear in mind that this was not just an isolated case of misunderstanding. Two more recent examples will show that there is a broader pattern of biased representation of history that offends Polish sensitivities, with similar misconceptions about European history identified in school textbooks in France and Germany, and an EU museum concept.

First, the publication of Franco-German history textbooks for secondary schools, *Histoire/Geschichte: L'Europe et le monde depuis 1945/Europa und die Welt seit 1945*, which may well contribute to the reconciliation between France and Germany, but at the expense of serious distortions of other European countries' history, including Poland. As a Polish historian and MEP (PiS), Wojciech Roszkowski, argued in a detailed study, among the major omissions in the book is its failure to mention the Soviet invasion of Poland on 17 September 1939 and, once again, the contribution of Solidarnosc. One does not need to accept all of Roszkowski's harsh criticisms,<sup>24</sup> to see the shortcomings of an account of European history that — as a more sympathetic book reviewer put it — has a "scent of the core European stable" (a clear allusion to the excessive focus on the French and German contribution to European integration).<sup>25</sup>

Alongside schools, museums play a crucial role in shaping public perception about history and its meaning. This underlines the importance of the second and similar controversy triggered by the proposed design of the "House of European Memory", initiated by the (then) president of the European Parliament, Dr Hans-Gert Pöttering. The proposal for the museum was drafted by a select group of experts drawn from across political and national divides, and was carefully framed in language that aimed to present a neutral view. Yet,

the agreed "conceptual basis for a House of European History" still prompted official protests from numerous MEPs, mainly from the new member states, who were concerned about "a number of serious omissions and misinterpretations".<sup>26</sup>

### **Not enough solidarity with workers' solidarity: 13 December 1981**

Successive West German governments before 1989 had to deal with a fundamental dilemma in the Polish–German relationship: how to bring about a process of genuine reconciliation with a nation that was not ruled by a legitimate government? Official gestures of friendship and humility that became prevalent under the Social Democratic strategy of *Ostpolitik* — which aimed to defuse tensions between East and West (including between Poland and West Germany) — unwittingly strengthened the legitimacy of the communist rulers. Even the most memorable image of *Ostpolitik*, Willy Brandt's *Kniefall* in front of the Warsaw Ghetto Monument in December 1970, was not free of such entanglements. In the view of many Poles, it occurred in "the wrong place at the wrong time",<sup>27</sup> particularly because the gesture could not have been protected against the uses and abuses of Polish communist propaganda.

One of the key aims of *Ostpolitik* was to improve the relationship between the two German states in order to ease the predicament of many Germans affected by the division. Implicitly, this strategy was based on the understanding that the division of Europe could not be changed in the foreseeable future. Helmut Schmidt sought to build on the legacy of Brandt's policies towards the East. In one of the most difficult moments of his political career, he found himself visiting East Germany on 13 December 1981, the day on which General Jaruzelski proclaimed Martial Law (yet another "wrong place at the wrong time" in the Polish–German relationship). Schmidt was unwilling to jeopardize the progress made in the German–German relationship, even if this required a more muted response to the events in Poland.

Queried by West German journalists about the events in Poland, he ended up agreeing with his host, the leader of the East German state Erich Honecker, that Jaruzelski's radical step was necessary to preserve peace and political stability in Europe. Schmidt continued praising the visit as a sign of a "good-neighbourly relationship", which attracted fierce criticisms from the right-of-centre media (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 14 December 1981).<sup>28</sup> The editorials in the major left-wing weekly, *Der Spiegel*, shared Schmidt's concern with political instability, dismissing "Polish romantic dreams of greatness" and blaming the Solidarity movement for endangering peace in Europe.<sup>29</sup> Similar arguments were also advanced by Willy Brandt in his new role as the leader of the Socialist International (*FAZ* 22 December 1989).

Years later, Schmidt sought to justify his stance by arguing that his government was indeed supportive of the Solidarity movement by passing a resolution in the Bundestag, and by encouraging German citizens to provide practical help. However, he had no doubts about the validity of the basic premise of *Ostpolitik*: *Wandel durch Annäherung* (change through rapprochement). Schmidt strongly opposed the more confrontational attitude towards the Soviet bloc represented by Ronald Reagan as irresponsible and naive:

Neither the majority of the American media nor the administration admitted to themselves the reality that the

partition of Central Europe into two spheres of influence (or into a western sphere of influence and an eastern power bloc), which had been initiated at Yalta, could not be abolished by television addresses, large gestures, and subsequent small steps.<sup>30</sup>

The irony is that Schmidt's justification of his inaction appeared in English just in time to be invalidated by history. The series of non-violent revolutions in 1989 proved precisely the power of "television addresses, large gestures and subsequent small steps".<sup>31</sup> One does not need to subscribe to Vaclav Havel's somewhat idealized account of 1989 as demonstrating that the "world might actually be changed by ... the power of a truthful word" to accept that symbolic politics, and indeed words, decisively contributed to the demise of communism.<sup>32</sup> Yet, in his preface "to the American reader" written shortly after the demise of the Berlin Wall, Schmidt still adhered to the principle of non-intervention and was concerned primarily with China and the Soviet Union, rather than dramatic changes in central Europe.

Schmidt epitomized the serious difficulties faced by leftwing politicians in western Europe more generally in their attitudes towards central and eastern Europe. While many were clearly sympathetic toward the first genuinely independent trade union in the eastern bloc, they resented their anti-communist elements in Poland and among their supporters in the West. Major leftwing parties in the West (e.g. in France and Italy) were hence divided about the appropriate response to the crises in Poland.

### **9 November 1989: Toward a "European Germany" or a "Franco-German Europe"?**

In another twist of history, the German-German relationship interfered with the German-Polish relationship on 9 November 1989. Just at the time of the fall of the Wall, the (then) German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, was visiting Poland. Confronted with the rapidly changing political situation in East Germany, Kohl felt that he had no other option than to interrupt his official visit and fly back to Germany.

Kohl recalled that his Polish hosts were understandably displeased about the interruption of the trip, particularly against the background of the "growing awareness that they were witnessing a development at the end of which Poland would find itself next to a reunified Germany with the population of 80 million".<sup>33</sup> Many Poles, alongside people in France, the UK — and, indeed, a number of intellectuals and politicians in both East and West Germany — were chary of the emergence of a powerful Germany that might destabilize Europe.

Given the traumatic history of the Polish-German relationship, it is surely not surprising that a large proportion of Poles were against German reunification: 36.5 per cent according to a snapshot survey published in *Gazeta Wyborcza* on 10 November 1989. If anything, it is remarkable that so many, almost 40 per cent according to the same survey, were in favour of it.<sup>34</sup> This might partly be explained by the fact that Polish dissidents were well prepared conceptually for this situation, having contemplated the possibility of German re-unification long before this was considered a realistic proposition even in Germany.<sup>35</sup>

Unsurprisingly then, after the fall of the Wall there was a widespread consensus among Polish, French and US political leaders that the success of

German unification was predicated on its strong commitment to Europe. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's Britain was suspicious of both Germany and Europe. Even German elites accepted that "the European Community was needed to save Germany from itself".<sup>36</sup> Yet, under the skilful leadership of Helmut Kohl, West Germany showed itself capable of pursuing national interests in a way that would have been inconceivable before the dramatic events of 1989. Notwithstanding the repeated and heart-felt assurances of all mainstream post-war politicians in West Germany that their aim was, in line with Thomas Mann's famous dictum, "not a German Europe, but a European Germany", Kohl accomplished a number of goals post-1989 that were seen as corresponding primarily with German national interests.<sup>37</sup>

One of the key points of contention between Poland and West Germany in 1989 and 1990 was the question of the inviolability of the Oder-Neisse border. It is worthwhile noting that the Polish non-communist leadership that emerged out of the first semi-free elections in June 1989, despite its strongly pro-western and pro-German attitude, was seriously concerned about the stability of Poland's western border and frustrated with Kohl's reluctance to make any official assurances about its inviolability even before the demise of the wall.

Kohl successfully defied political pressure from both his international partners, led by the French President François Mitterrand, and his junior coalition partner, the Free Democrats, represented in the government by Hans-Dietrich Genscher,<sup>38</sup> to publicly confirm the border, arguing that "only a united and sovereign Germany could definitely confirm its borders".<sup>39</sup> As Kohl envisaged, the issue was only settled after German unification in October 1990 with the German-Polish Border Treaty signed by the respective foreign ministers in November 1990.

The main tension that arose in the Franco-German relationship, as an immediate result of the fall of the Wall, emerged from differing perspectives on the future of Europe against the background of possible German unification. The perception of France's strong opposition to German unification might have been exaggerated, but there can be little doubt that Mitterrand was wary of the prospect of a more powerful Germany dominating Europe.<sup>40</sup> To counterbalance this, French politicians favoured the intensification of European integration, making their support for a unified Germany dependent on ever-stronger German support for a unified Europe.

This opened up a dispute known in the EU literature as one between the proponents of "deepening" and "widening". French elites resolutely favoured "deepening", that is further strengthening of political and economic ties among west European nations to create the "ever closer union" foreshadowed by Monnet. Mitterrand, in particular, feared that EU enlargement would dilute the west European integration project. Instead, he proposed that the whole of Europe, including the Soviet Union, be integrated in the form of a loose "European Confederation".

At any rate, it is clear that France initially attempted to postpone EC/EU membership for central and eastern European countries "for as long a period as possible".<sup>41</sup> While the German political leadership accepted the need for more European unity, it prioritized German unity. In line with this, Germany favoured "widening" before "deepening", while Thatcher's Britain advocated "widening" at the expense of "deepening". The sequencing of events clearly confirmed the German standpoint at least in relation to East Germany.

However, while East Germany — through the backdoor of German unification — was fully integrated into west European structures only 11 months after the fall of the wall, Poland, alongside its central and eastern European counterparts, had to wait 15 years.

It is against this historical background that the EU communication strategy about the "meaning of 1989" was bound to backfire. In contrast to the European Commission and its audiovisual services, German politicians have demonstrated greater awareness of their past shortcomings and misjudgements *vis-à-vis* Poland. Gerhard Schröder, for example, came close to apologizing for the aspects of *Ostpolitik* that appeared to have led to his predecessors siding with the Polish communist government rather than the Polish people. In a speech delivered in December 2000 to a joint session of the Polish parliament and senate, Schröder acknowledged that to the extent that a "a number of German politicians, including some Social Democrats, prioritized stability at the time of the rise of the Solidarnosc movement, they failed to do justice to the historic significance of the Polish fight for liberty".<sup>42</sup>

Echoing this sentiment, the leading editorial in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on 4 June 2009, 20 years after the first semi-free elections in Poland, stressed the importance of Poland as "the first domino" that led to the eventual fall of communism in Europe.<sup>43</sup> On the same day, Angela Merkel, attending the commemorations of the elections in Warsaw, thanked Poles for their contribution to liberty in Europe with a simple "*dziękuję bardzo* (many thanks) for ever".<sup>44</sup>

### **9 November 1989: commemoration in Berlin, 9 November 2009**

It appears that the West learned a lesson from the embarrassment and discord caused by the ill-conceived EU video production commemorating the 1989 revolutions. By the time of the actual celebrations of the fall of the Wall, there was a clear sense that this was a truly European, or indeed a world event, that should not be considered in isolation. The city of Berlin, with the participation of the EU Commission's Directorate General for Communication and the EU Commission Representation in Berlin, organized the "Festival of Freedom".

In an elaborate installation consisting of 1000 giant styrofoam dominoes, a section of the Berlin Wall was "reconstructed" in order to invoke the sequence of revolutionary events in 1989. Fittingly, the person asked to topple the first of these dominoes was none other than Lech Walesa. The domino pieces were decorated by school children from around the world, depicting past and present divisions caused by political conflicts, with the first one stating simply "es begann in Polen" (it started in Poland).

The event was attended by world leaders representing the former Allies, each of whom addressed a large gathering of the people of Berlin: the French President, Nicholas Sarkozy, the Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev, the British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown and the US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton. In the spirit of Franco-German friendship, the first guest invited to present a speech was Sarkozy. He started by complimenting the people gathered:

On 9 November 1989, you, the people of Berlin, changed the world by realizing your dream, the dream of freedom. On 9 November 1989, the whole world looked at Berlin, as you, the people of Berlin, brought down the wall of shame. [...] This

was possible because freedom-loving men and women dared to dream about a European ideal.

Sarkozy continued by stressing the importance of Franco-German "friendship, brotherhood and solidarity" for peace in Europe. He concluded by highlighting the message that "a reconciled Europe proudly embodies and projects to the wider world: "Wir sind Brüder, wir sind Berliner".<sup>45</sup>

Sarkozy's speech was marred by three gaffes. Firstly, he mispronounced the German concluding sentence, causing his attempt to emulate Kennedy's famous "Ich bin ein Berliner" to fall flat. Secondly, his relentless desire to be at the heart, if not the cause of major events, led him to claim that he was in Berlin on 9 November 1989. His official Facebook website showed a photograph of the then young politician chipping off parts of the wall, as so many people of Berlin, as well as tourists from all around the world, did at the time. The revelation that Sarkozy actually only arrived in Berlin a few weeks later caused major embarrassment and was widely covered in the media worldwide. However, it was the third, and least noticed gaffe that is relevant to this study. As many an EU official account did in the past,<sup>46</sup> Sarkozy disregarded the sequencing of events by saying that "you (the people of Berlin) tore down this wall, which everyone deemed indestructible, and *from this day onwards* other nations — Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland — freed themselves from tyranny" (author's italics).<sup>47</sup>

Sarkozy's gaffes unwittingly reveal that "EU Europe" still has a long way to go in reaching a self-understanding that would be acceptable to all its members, old and new. Yet there are other reasons why any celebrations of 9 November in Germany have to be approached with the utmost caution. The somewhat accidental announcement of the end of the ban on leaving the GDR by the politburo member Günther Schabowski was made on a day that is relevant to two dark aspects of the German political tradition that shaped European politics in the twentieth century: communism and Nazism. On 9 November 1918, Karl Liebknecht proclaimed the short-lived first German Socialist Republic; twenty years later, on 9 November 1938, the infamous *Kristallnacht* marked a turning point in the Nazi persecution of the Jews. For these reasons, the day is unlikely to ever be proclaimed in Germany as a national holiday, despite repeated calls for its recognition.

## In conclusion

It is clear that any attempt to reach a common understanding about the "true meaning" of key moments in history is fraught with difficulties. Such consensus is difficult to achieve at a national level; to aspire to its achievement at the EU level is bound to backfire. The juxtaposition of uplifting narratives produced by the European Commission, with the many, messy histories of participating nations points towards the limits of the usage of history for political aims, however worthy those aims might be. Yet, there are also some positive lessons that can be drawn from the dissonance caused by the EU attempts to appropriate the legacy of 1989.

France, Germany and the supranational institutions of the European Union, such as the European Commission, will need to learn to accept that they are no longer exclusively at the heart of the European project. In line with this, some of the key assumptions that drove the European project from its early stages are being challenged as a result of the massive political transformation brought about by the events of 1989. The postwar project of European unity in the

West was informed by the rejection of nationalism as a destructive force, whereas in the communist part of Europe, nationalism was experienced as a liberating force.<sup>48</sup> The project in the West was shaped by the experience of Nazism; after 1989, the notion of "never again Nazism" had to be complemented with "never again Stalinism".

Reflecting on the changed nature of Europe 20 years after the collapse of communism, a perceptive British sociologist proclaimed boldly that "we are all post-communist now".<sup>49</sup> This is to be understood not as a description of political reality in contemporary Europe, but rather as a challenge that European nations and their elites in both East and West must take seriously, if the European project is to succeed. In a similar vein, when Jerzy Buzek, on his election as President of the European Parliament, proclaimed in his acceptance speech that "there is now no 'you' (in the West) and 'us' (in the East): we live in a shared Europe", it was a statement of intent, rather than a statement of fact.<sup>50</sup> Debates about key historic events and their meaning serve as a reminder that there are still significant divisions between the two parts of Europe that used to be divided by the Iron Curtain, just as there are divisions between the nations of Europe regardless of their geographic location. Yet, to accept that a Europe of 27 nation-states must live with discord is true to the legacy of EU founding fathers such as Jean Monnet and Konrad Adenauer, as much as it is to the legacy of the architects of the Velvet Revolutions of 1989 such as Adam Michnik and Vaclav Havel. With their mixture of idealism and pragmatism, these Europeans understood that the true meaning of politics consists in accepting dissonance while not giving up aspirations for more harmony.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Leonard, *Why Europe will run the 21st century*, London 2005, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Darnton, *Euro State of Mind*, *The New York Review of Books*, 28 February 2002, 30–2.

<sup>3</sup> Caryl Clark, *Forging Identity: Beethoven's 'Ode' as European Anthem*. *Critical Inquiry*, 23/1997, 789–807.

<sup>4</sup> One of the best videos about EU enlargement is devoted to Bulgaria's accession: "Bulgaria in EU: Ode to Joy" ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YRATI\\_jKU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YRATI_jKU), accessed on 28 December, 2009). Not surprisingly, the video produced by the European Commission audio-visual services to celebrate the 2004 enlargement is also underlined by Beethoven's Ode to Joy.

<sup>5</sup> Pascal Fontaine, *A new idea for Europe: the Schuman declaration — 1950–2000*, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2000, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Monnet, *Memoirs*, London 1978, 294.

<sup>7</sup> F Larat, *Present-ing the Past: Political Narratives on European History and the Justification of EU Integration*, *German Law Review*, Vol. 6, No. 2 2005, 273–90.

<sup>8</sup> Franz C Mayer and Jan Palmowski, *European Identities and the EU — The Ties that Bind the Peoples of Europe*. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 3, 2004, 573–98.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* 580

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Weiler, *A Quiet Revolution: The European Court of Justice and its Interlocutors*, *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 4, 1994 510–34.

<sup>11</sup> This slogan usually entails, particularly in Germany, the rejection of the ultimate crime of the Second World War: 'never again Auschwitz'. In line with this, Helmut Dubiel described 'the Holocaust as a foundational myth for the European Union' (Helmut Dubiel *The Remembrance of the Holocaust as a Catalyst for a Transnational Ethic?* *New German*

Critique, 90/2003, 68). The nations in Central and Eastern Europe have sought to expand on this myth by including the rejection of Stalinism alongside Nazism in the European self-understanding. This cause has been particularly advanced in the European Parliament, which in September 2008 designated 23 August, the anniversary of the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact of 1939, as the 'European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism'.

- <sup>12</sup> It is worthwhile noting that the anthem does this implicitly, for it has no lyrics. According to Caryl Clark the anthem is "truly a bastard child of the Enlightenment: a song without words; hope without a text" (Clark, 1997, p. 801). Yet, Clark's detailed study also shows why this was politically necessary: "to sanction a German-language text would risk disturbing the ghost that still haunts the European Union — the ghost of Germany ascendant" (Clark, 1997, p. 803). Moreover, the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty in November 2009 further reduced the official status of the anthem, as there is no explicit reference to it in the way envisaged by the failed constitutional treaty. The EU has thus an anthem without words that does not dare to speak its name.
- <sup>13</sup> Michael Bruter, *Citizens of Europe? The emergence of a mass European identity*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2005, 156–8
- <sup>14</sup> Very few serious commentators might be as blinded by their enthusiasm for the EU as to consider it the main reason for the demise of communism. William Pfaff, for one, celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the Treaty of Rome by proclaiming: "Fundamentally, the EU did it. [...] The European Union, more than any other single factor, was responsible for the defeat of the Soviet Union in the cold war." William Pfaff, *Happy Birthday! The New York Review of Books*, Vol. 54 7/2007, 20.
- <sup>15</sup> Paul Hainsworth, *France Says No: The 29 May 2005 Referendum on the European Constitution*, Parliamentary Affairs, Vol. 59, No. 1, 2006 108–9.
- <sup>16</sup> Jan Tombinski, Poland's ambassador to the EU, was right to point out that the Polish Round Table resonated with "the archetype of the EU ideal". Just as political negotiations were at the heart of the "quiet revolution" (Weiler, 1994) that radically transformed post-war Europe, the Polish Round Table discussions pioneered a model for the negotiated revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe.
- <sup>17</sup> <http://www.tvn24.pl/-1,1600629,0,1,idiotyczny-blad-komisji-europejskiej,wiadomosc.html> (accessed on 5 January 2010).
- <sup>18</sup> *ibid*
- <sup>19</sup> Dominika Uhlig and Dominika Pszczolkowska, "*Bruksela (moze) doklei "Solidarnosc"*", *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 19 May 2009.
- <sup>20</sup> J. Guzik, "*Poprawia spot o rocznicy upadku komunizmu*", *Rzeczpospolita*, 18 May 2009.
- <sup>21</sup> Buguslow Sonik, "*Sonik zada wycofania spotu Komisji Europejskiej*", available at <http://www.boguslawsonik.pl/index.php?nr2=587> accessed 9/9/2010
- <sup>22</sup> This production may well have satisfied most Polish viewers (as can be seen from their responses on YouTube), but it found generally far less viewers than the original video to which it responded. The fact that Ms Wloka is real makes her look less real: the artistic imagination that gave rise to the original video led to the creation of a story that appears far more authentic than a somewhat pedestrian depiction of a real person! For more information about the video and a web link see: [http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,6688700,UE\\_poprawila\\_spot\\_i\\_dodala\\_Bono\\_zobacz\\_film\\_.html](http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,6688700,UE_poprawila_spot_i_dodala_Bono_zobacz_film_.html) (accessed on 5 January 2010).
- <sup>23</sup> "There is no freedom without Solidarity" was a popular slogan in Poland in the 1980s. In allusion to this, *Gazeta Wyborcza* published a critical article about the EU video entitled *Bruksela o wolnosci bez "Solidarnosci"* (Brussels on freedom without Solidarity) Uhlig, 2009.
- <sup>24</sup> He proclaimed the publication "a failure", concluding: "The intention of creating common French-German memory in the young generation has become all the world to the authors. Since ... European integration takes so much space then why is there no information about problems of Ireland, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Italy, Portugal, Greece or Cyprus, not to mention Eastern and Central Europe countries? The knowledge from the textbook will shape the student's incorrect belief that overcoming German and French nationalisms has enabled Europe to solve its main problems and that these two countries are supposed to play a special role in Europe and their mission is to manage the affairs of the European Union and European historical memory." See <http://www.euroclio.eu/download/2009/Wojciech%20Roszkowski%20-%20Criticism%20of%20New%20History%20Textbook.pdf> (accessed on 5 May 2010).
- <sup>25</sup> Joseph Hanemann, *Kerneuropäischer Stallgeruch*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 8 May 2006, 43.
- <sup>26</sup> The letter addressed to the President of the European Parliament from 4 December 2008, listed 22 objections against the "Conceptual Basis for a House of European History" and was signed by 13 MEPs starting with Adam Bielan and Wojciech Roszkowski (both from the Polish conservative Law and Justice Party, which recently became a crucial partner for the

- British Tories in creating a new antifederalist group, the European Conservatives and Reformists), and finishing with György Schöpfin (a distinguished political scientist from the Hungarian Fidesz party, which is a member of the Group of the European People's Party). See [http://www.roszkowski.pl/www/media/files/aktualnosci/2008/34/List\\_ws\\_Domu\\_Historii.pdf](http://www.roszkowski.pl/www/media/files/aktualnosci/2008/34/List_ws_Domu_Historii.pdf)
- 27 Adam Krzeminski, *Der Kniefall*, in Hagen Schulze and Etienne Francois, (eds.) *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte 1*, München: Beck 2001, 431–446.
- 28 Johann George Reifmüller, *Deutsche Verhältnisse*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 16 December 1981, 1.
- 29 Rudolf Augstein, *Die Polnische Tragödie*, *Der Spiegel*, Vol. 35, No. 52, 21 December 1981, 88. In a similar way, Theo Sommer, wrote in the weekly *Die Zeit*, "it is not necessary to approve of the perfect military putsch of General Jaruzelski... Yet, we must wish it to be successful. The next act in this Polish drama would have been otherwise a massive military intervention". T. Sommer, *Rückfall in den Kalten Krieg?* *Die Zeit*, 18 December 1981, 1.
- 30 Helmut Schmidt, *Men and powers: a political retrospective*, New York: Random House 1989, 260.
- 31 *ibid.*
- 32 Vaclav Havel, *Summer Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1992, 5. Stefan Auer, *Violence and the End of Revolution after 1989*, Thesis Eleven, No. 97 2009, 16.
- 33 Helmut Kohl, *Erinnerungen 1982–1990*, München Droemer 2005, 967.
- 34 Hans Dietrich Genscher, the then German Foreign Minister, captured well how the ambivalent attitude of the Polish people was reflected by the Polish leadership. During a working breakfast on 10 November 1989, he observed that "Lech Walesa was worried, if not shocked about the demise of the Wall", while Bronislaw Geremek, noticing Genscher's consternation at Walesa's reaction, assured him that the "development was delightful for Germans and Europe, as well as Poland" (Genscher, 1995, p. 655).
- 35 As early as 1977, the so-called "Polish Alliance for Independence" ("Polskie Porozumienie Niepodlegosciowe", P.P.N.) argued that Polish aspirations for liberty must go hand in hand with the acceptance of the eventual unification of Germany. In a programmatic document published in an influential Polish exile monthly, *Kultura*, the Alliance argued explicitly, that "German unification is in Poland's interest, provided two conditions were fulfilled: unconditional recognition of our western border; Germany would be fully integrated in the European Community (P.P.N., 1978, p. 127). Even though the statement was also published in West Germany in the *Osteuropa* monthly, it was largely ignored there: "A daring vision of the future Poland–Germany partnership strayed too far from the political realities of the day and was unimaginable to the German political elites" (Klaus Ziemer, *The Polish Cause and the German Cause in the 20th Century. The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs*, 1/2008, 128). For a more detailed account of the continuity between pre–1989 dissident ideas about Poland's place in Europe and the foreign policies of the first post–communist government see Marcin Zaborowski, *Germany, Poland and Europe: Conflict, Cooperation and Europeanization* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2005, 108–9).
- 36 Timothy Garton Ash, *In Europe's name: Germany and the divided continent*, New York: Random House 1993, 389.
- 37 Andrew Moravcsik, *The choice for Europe: social purpose and state power from Messina to Maastricht*, Ithaca, N.Y. Cornell University Press 1998, 387.
- 38 The dispute about the handling of the Oder–Neisse border triggered a major coalition crisis in the government, though this is ignored, or played down in both Genscher's (Hans–Dietrich Genscher, *Erinnerungen*, Berlin: Siedler Verlag 1995) and Kohl's memoirs (Karl–Rudolf Korte, *Deutschlandpolitik in Helmut Kohls Kanzlerschaft: Regierungsstil und Entscheidungen 1982–1989*, Stuttgart: *Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt* 1998, 471).
- 39 Frédéric Bozo, *Mitterrand, the end of the Cold War and German unification*, New York Berghahn Books 2009, 222.
- 40 In a recent study based on extensive archival research, Frédéric Bozo exposes a number of shortcomings in previous accounts of the French position towards German unity, arguing convincingly that the French politicians were not as strongly opposed to German unity as they appeared to their contemporaries. Yet, Bozo's study also shows that France was indeed reluctant to contemplate the enlargement of (what was soon to become) the European Union. Frédéric Bozo, *The Failure of a Grand Design: Mitterrand's European Confederation, 1989–1991*, *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2008, 391–412.
- 41 Mitterrand committed a serious blunder when he proclaimed in Prague in November 1991 that the nations of Central and Eastern Europe would have to 'wait for several decades before joining the European Community' Jean–Marc Trouille, *France, Germany and the eastwards Expansion of the EU: Towards a Common Ostpolitik*, in Hilary Ingham and

- Mike Ingham (eds.) *EU Expansion to the East: Prospects and Problems*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar 2002, 54.
- <sup>42</sup> Gerhard Schröder, *Ohne polnisches Freiheitsstreben wäre die Geschichte der deutschen Einheit weniger glücklich verlaufen*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 7 December 2000, 10.
- <sup>43</sup> Konrad Schuller, *Der erste Dominostein*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 4 June 2009, 1.
- <sup>44</sup> Konrad Schuller, *Wem gehört der Sieg über den Kommunismus?* *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 5 June 2009, 1.
- <sup>45</sup> Nicolas Sarkozy, "Staatspräsident Sarkozy in Berlin zum 20. Jahrestag des Falls der Berliner Mauer", 2009 [www.botschaftfrankreich.de/spip.php?article4424](http://www.botschaftfrankreich.de/spip.php?article4424) accessed 9/9/2010
- <sup>46</sup> In line with the commemorative video discussed above, a brochure produced by the European Commission Directorate–General for Communication, *Europe in 12 lessons*, states: "The political shape of Europe was dramatically changed when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. This led to the unification of Germany in October 1990 and the coming of democracy to the countries of central and eastern Europe as they broke away from Soviet control" (author's italics, Fontaine, 2006, p. 11).
- <sup>47</sup> Op. cit. Sarkozy, 2009
- <sup>48</sup> Stefan Auer, *Liberal Nationalism in Central Europe*, London: Routledge 2004.
- <sup>49</sup> William Outhwaite, *Europe Beyond East and West*. In C Rumford (ed.) *The SAGE Handbook of European Studies*, London: Sage 2009, 52. Admittedly, this notion will sound strange to Polish readers accustomed to using the term "post–communist" to describe those who were communist once. As Outhwaite explains, the dictum is used "in the sense that Europe as a whole, as well as the European Union, has been radically transformed by what happened in and around 1989 in the communist half of the continent".
- <sup>50</sup> Joshua Chaffin and Jan Cienski, *MEPs elect Poland's Buzek to presidency*. *Financial Times*, 14 July 2009.

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