

European Unity in the Post Cold War Era

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BEN BRADLEY, FEB 22 2012

The Legacy of the Cold War

The Cold War, or more accurately the “Era of Cold Wars” (Reynolds 1992 p.10), between 1947 and 1991 divided Europe for over 40 years, eventually culminating in the rapid disintegration of the Soviet Union (USSR). When Gorbachev became Russian Head of State in 1988 he realised that he could not keep up with Reagan’s arms stockpile and that the US “Star Wars” nuclear defense project, whilst far-fetched, would make the Soviets’ nuclear strength irrelevant. The huge extent of Russia’s internal problems; rising alcoholism, depression, and social unrest; combined with an old-fashioned and uncompetitive industrial economy and vast expenditures on client states in Eastern Europe, as well as a long and drawn out war in Afghanistan, lead Gorbachev to present a policy of ‘*glasnost*’ and ‘*perestroika*’, meaning openness and restructuring – leading to a withdrawal of Soviet influence and the independence of many former Soviet states (Bale 2005 p.10). The fall of the Soviet Union lead to a reunited Germany, a US withdrawal from Europe and its affairs, and a vast number of new states seeking to ‘rejoin’ the West.

Whilst Europe had been divided by the ‘Iron Curtain’, and the much less metaphorical Berlin Wall, during the Cold War period, reunification and the subsequent process of integration has brought its own controversies and divisions. This essay will explore some of these issues, compare their significance to Cold War divisions and, ultimately, make a conclusion as to whether these new dilemmas can be measured on a similar scale of those from the 1950s to 1980s.

The Integration Process

The process of European integration began in the immediate aftermath of World War II with the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). The E.C., or European Communities, was the main arena for cooperation during the 1980s and 1990s before the modern European Union came to be after the Maastricht Treaty of 1992. The key issue in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet collapse was the emergence of 15 new European nation-states, including Latvia, Estonia, and Ukraine, along with several other states that had been part of the Eastern Bloc but not integrated into the USSR, such as Czechoslovakia and Poland. Almost all of these states wished to become a part of a liberal democratic European ideal. This opened up the ‘stable’ region of Western Europe, which had been neatly defined and organised within clear boundaries between the Atlantic and the Iron Curtain, to a now unknown border of ‘greater’ Europe and the potentially volatile East (Wallace 1992, p.40).

There were several issues with the integration of the ‘Eastern Bloc’ states, not least the economic implications. Western Europe was flourishing in a new and more open market of free trade, whilst the Eastern states remained ‘Stalin-esque’ industrial nations. Many required serious investment to bring them up to Western standards and some would need ‘propping up’ with Western funds. The idea of free movement between European nations made this more difficult as many of the fit and capable workers in the East sought to emigrate to richer states. How do you rebuild an economy when all of its workers are leaving?

Another key issue was over where the new border line should be drawn. Article 237 of the E.C.’s Treaty gave all European states the right to apply for membership (Cederman 2001, p.176), but where did Europe end? The Iron Curtain had been almost useful in that it clearly defined the geography of the region, but now things were much less

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clear. For example, was Turkey a European state or a part of the Middle East and would its inclusion, or indeed its exclusion, have an impact on international politics or the relationship between a largely Christian Europe and the Muslim world? Opening up the borders also made the union vulnerable to, and partly responsible for, the volatile political situations in Eastern Europe. It opened the previously stable community up to war and crises like the Balkans conflicts and Milosevic's 'ethnic cleansing' in Kosovo (Wallace 1992).

In What Sense is Europe a 'Union'?

One key factor in the solidarity of the European states is a shared ideology. This is certainly true of the key Western players, if not Europe as a whole. Germany, France, Great Britain, Italy, Spain, and others are all largely Christian liberal democracies. They have representative government and value freedom. A shared ideology leads to unity. As well as this, these states also have similar global objectives and agendas due to their geographical proximity and shared international concerns. This shared ideology was similarly a factor during the Cold War and served to unite the West against the USSR.

The 1985 Schengen Agreement (implemented by 7 nations in 1995) first floated the idea of free passage between nations of the smaller Europe of the time. This has been continued and enhanced by the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty to the point where the now 25 signatories are effectively borderless to their partners (BBC News 2011). Whilst this idea began to take shape in 1985 it was then between only Western states. The idea of an agreement which included states like Estonia and Lithuania could not have been contemplated during that period as these nations were deep in the East of the 'Iron Curtain'.

It is certainly the case that there is a significant economic union between the E.U. States; more so than ever before. The open market and free trade agreements mean that each nation buys from and sells to the others. The economic welfare of each is inextricably linked to the success or failure of not just their own state, but the others as well (MacDonald and Dearden 2005). The Euro currency was an unprecedented step in making trade easier and lowering costs, as well as being a symbol of the close ties between the nations. This is clearly identifiable in the recent bailouts of Greece, Ireland, and Portugal. As much as states are reluctant to spend outside of their own nation they realise that the fate of Greece may also decide their own fate, and so billions of Euros were pooled to rescue the 'Eurozone'.

The Lisbon Treaty, signed in 2007 and enacted in 2009, was a major step towards political and social integration. The new European Union has an Assembly, a Council, and now a President. This is seen by many as a step towards a United States of Europe under E.U. governance; a goal of many central European leaders dating back decades (see Hutchinson 1929 and Herriot 1930 amongst many others). The Charter of Fundamental rights ensures equality of treatment for all citizens of Europe across the whole community and is yet another step towards a unitary social policy (Beneyto 2008, p.4). This kind of social cohesion was almost unfathomable during the Cold War period as the world was so clearly divided. A long history of conflict and friction between the now closely linked European nations meant that few could foresee a single, united social policy.

What Divides Contemporary Europe?

One of the key divisions in the modern European Union is between 'interventionists' like the French and 'free-traders', like Germany. Nations like France want to safeguard their national industries and ensure that their economic and productive future is secure. According to Beck and Grande (2004, p.146) this kind of "protectionism is the most pronounced anti-European strategy." Opposed to this, the free traders, like the Germans, want to see even less regulation to make European production and trade as a whole cheaper and more efficient. In a sense this division has similarities with the Cold War; two opposed ideologies and only one can ultimately succeed. However, unlike the Cold War these nations have many more areas of solidarity which remove the possibility of conflict.

One schism which really is a hangover from the Cold War is the continuing East/West divide. Russia is still not a part of the union and it is questionable whether they will ever want to be. Vladimir Putin is fearful of Western influence, especially of the USA, and sees Europe as answerable to America (Blair 2010). Those states which came under Russian influence in the second half of the 20th century are still seen as poor cousins of the West. In Britain people

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talk of Eastern Europeans 'coming over here and taking our jobs'; a sentiment which is not uncommon in other Western states. Sivandan says (in Macey 1992, p.142) that:

"citizenship may open Europe's borders... but racism which can't tell a citizen from an immigrant, an immigrant from a refugee, classes all third world peoples as immigrants and refugees and all immigrants and refugees as terrorists and drug dealers is going to make such movement fraught with difficulty".

This clearly shows the long-lasting impact of Communist occupation, and many modern European issues are in fact Cold War issues; still alive and divisive.

It may sound strange but it often seems that democracy is a factor which holds back the greater European Union. 'Euroscepticism' is rife within nationalist sections of individual states, and political systems which advocate a regular change of national leadership also advocate inconsistent policies towards integration. To use Britain as an example; Tony Blair's Labour government leaned towards Europe and were responsible for Britain's signature on the Lisbon Treaty, however they have been replaced by a coalition government who's priorities are much less clear. Whilst the leading Conservative Party have refused to grant any more powers to the E.U. their coalition partners, the Liberal Democrats, are the most pro-European party in British mainstream politics. This ideological divide serves to emphasize the fact that there is never likely to be consensus on what level of power should be afforded to European government. The age old intergovernmentalism versus supranationalism debate continues, and whilst some nations will give anything to keep their sovereignty others would gladly be a part of a European Federation under E.U. control (Dosenrode 2007). In the current economic climate it is possible Germany, who of the major economic powers, is most anti-Europe, as its people see their taxes and bills rise more than anywhere else to bail out the weaker states.

In recent times, since the financial crisis began in 2008, the economy has been a key divisive factor in Europe. There is a 'tier' system beginning to appear within the Eurozone where the richer nations have much more influence. An example of this is Germany's dominance of the bailout talks and its influence over the financial policy in countries like Greece, who are in financial crisis. There is more complexity to this division than just 'big' or 'small' nations; Italy is one of the largest and most powerful states in the EU, but is itself in a situation where other nations will dictate its financial policy. This level of control for some is necessary, but for others it is the problem, not the solution. If Germany must continue to fund other nations to keep the EU together, then surely it will be tempted to 'cut and run' (Great Lakes Forex 2011).

Cold War Comparisons

So is Europe equally as divided as it was in the period of Cold War between 1947 and 1991? Clearly the Berlin Wall is gone and Germany is reunified but it seems as though the 'Iron Curtain' has not been fully drawn back. There is still a clear division between Eastern and Western states, with citizens of the richer Western nations more likely to resent the free movement and immigration from East to West than support it. Whilst this clash is clearly still present from the Cold War it is of course not as overt as it was then; there are no plans to build a wall around Britain to keep out the Poles, for example.

There have been many positive steps towards integration and a true union of states. The most successful of these is clearly economic and, whilst the Eurozone is currently in crisis, the bailouts and constant meetings of the great European economic powers are evidence that the Euro currency is of vast importance, and shows that the fate of the individual nations truly is tied to that of the others. A free market and reduced barriers for trade represent an unprecedented degree of integration that is likely to be lasting. This level of integration was thought impossible in a period where one could not even cross from the East to West of an individual nation without risking one's life, as in Germany. The key issue now is perhaps that over sovereignty versus supranational governance, and perhaps it will be the next 20 years rather than those previous that decide whether 'Europe' will survive in its current incarnation.

To conclude, it is clear that Europe is far closer now than it was before 1991. Many of those seemingly troublesome Eastern nations are now respected members of the community and the level of cooperation between states is unprecedented. There are still tensions; not least the lasting East versus West divide, but they are far from the scale

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exhibited during the Cold War. A key difference is that there is no longer such involvement from either the US or modern Russia and Europe is now, more than ever, responsible for its own future. The European Union has gone further than ever before to ensure the future of Europe as an economic union and, whilst they are some way behind, political and social integration is also now a key part of its structure. In brief, the answer to the question is no, Europe is much closer now than ever before.

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