

Published in
DER STANDARD
October 3, 2020

Germany's Rebirth and the Death of an Era

Daniel S. Hamilton

In 1990, Germany's peaceful unification heralded the end of the Cold War. It opened new vistas for Europe and the world.

The new era gradually came to be defined by the paradigm of a magnetic, largely unchallenged and gradually expanding Western-led order, in which the United States would continue to provide reassurance and support, where eastern Europe and eventually Russia could potentially find a place, where military tensions and forces would be reduced, and where growing interdependencies and open borders would generate greater security and prosperity. President George H.W. Bush's powerful vision of a "Europe whole and free" seemed within our grasp.

Much was achieved during this period. A host of countries walked through the doors of NATO, the European Union, and other organizations in ways that were not at the expense of other states or institutions. Europe was not fully whole, but it was no longer divided. It was not fully free, but vast parts of the continent were no longer under the thumb of domestic autocrats or foreign overseers. It was not fully at peace, but it was more secure than at any time in the previous century.

We have every right to be proud of these accomplishments. But we should have the courage to admit that as time marched on, the vision of a Europe whole and free became more slogan than project, and the business of knitting the continent together was left undone. And now a conflation of crises has so shaken our smug assumptions that we risk having future historians remark that the 30th anniversary of Germany's rebirth coincided with the death of the post-Cold War era.

Europe's ground continues to shift. The Soviet succession remains open-ended. Russian interventions in Georgia and Ukraine were not isolated episodes, they were symptomatic of deeper currents. The unfolding drama in Belarus is just the latest evidence that Europe's vast eastern spaces will remain turbulent, and sporadically violent, for the foreseeable future.

The post-Cold War paradigm posited that the magnetic qualities of the European Union would continue to generate prosperity and safeguard democracy, holding its members together while exerting an irresistible pull on non-members to create conditions by which their integration into the Union could be possible.

The new reality is that the European experiment, while still ground-breaking and attractive in many ways, has lost a good deal of its cohesive, transformative power. For more Europeans, "ever closer Union" is neither inevitable nor necessarily desirable, the "Europe of institutions"

seems unprepared to tackle down-home challenges, and the slogan “more Europe” prompts more questions than answers.

A European Union whose societies are once again defining and delineating themselves from each other is not one willing or able to integrate additional societies knocking on its door. Europe’s west is less confident and prepared to reach out in any significant way to Europe’s east than at any time in a generation. For a quarter century the European agenda was about how to transform one’s neighbors. Now it is about how to avoid being transformed by those neighbors.

As a result, the Europe of our hopes risks being succumbed by the Europe of our fears. “Europe whole and free” is becoming Europe fractured and anxious, less settled and more fluid, less capable and more turbulent, less Merkel and more German at a time when more Germans are questioning conventional answers to unconventional challenges.

As if these problems were not tough enough, Europeans are simply flummoxed by the fact that their major external protagonists – Russia, China, and even the United States – have each in their own way become revisionist powers with regard to European order.

Russia and China are both revisionists, yet each poses a distinct challenge. Moscow smashes the rules loudly; Beijing erodes them quietly. China is a rising power. Its economic reach, rapid technological progress and growing military capabilities, its global diplomacy geared to very different norms, and its vast resource needs render it a systemic challenger. Russia, in contrast, is a declining power. It does not have China’s resources. It is, however, both more desperate and much closer to Europe. In the short- to medium-term it could be more dangerous.

The real head-spinner for most Europeans is that the most unpredictable actor in this mix may in fact be the United States. Washington is more a source of anxiety than reassurance. America is drifting away from its traditional role as a European power, one that was comprehensively engaged on the continent, supportive of its allies and committed to tackling common challenges. It is becoming simply a power in Europe, one that is selectively engaged, more spoiler than stakeholder, more focused on shedding burdens than sharing them.

That is not the America Europe needs. However, it could be the America Europe gets – unless Europeans are prepared to address the challenges of a new age rather than vainly trying to recapture an era that has passed.

Daniel S. Hamilton is the Austrian Marshall Plan Foundation Distinguished Fellow and Director of the Woodrow Wilson Center’s Global Europe Program.