



Leaving a mark

The Apollo 11 moon landing on 20 July 1969 was a landmark event, witnessed by an unprecedented percentage of the global population and changing our perceptions of the world. Which major events and developments since then have changed society – for better or worse? Our panel of commentators looks at the events that have changed today's world



THE NEW EUROPE

1989 THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL

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THE YEAR 1989 will be seen as a watershed in world history in the same vein as 1789 and 1848. However, it was not 'the end of history' and the simple triumph of liberal democracy and capitalism over the one-party state and the socialist economy. In effect, 1989 was the culmination of a long process of economic decay and moral bankruptcy.

The geography of Europe changed dramatically. The German Democratic Republic (GDR) was united with the far larger and more advanced Federal Republic. Overnight, the economic and political system collapsed, forcing the government of Chancellor Kohl to begin the process of pouring vast sums of money into the former communist country. This reconstruction process goes on to this day and has implications for the current financial crisis. As a result of its experiences in the former GDR, the government of Chancellor Merkel is wary of another large fiscal stimulus.

The Czech and Slovak republics agreed to go their separate ways (1 January 1993) in what was referred to as 'the Velvet Divorce'. This was a far cry from the bloody wars that engulfed Yugoslavia, resulting in sieges and atrocities not witnessed on the European continent since the Second World War. The collapse of the USSR meant independence for the Baltic, Central Asian and Caucasian states. Ethnic conflicts, such as in Chechnya, came to the fore. Elsewhere, the beast of nationalism took less aggressive forms, but there were still disputes between Hungary and her neighbours, especially with Slovakia and Romania over Hungarian minority rights. Meanwhile, Roma

groups across the former communist bloc looked warily at the rise of right-wing nationalist parties.

The changes in the economic base of the region were dramatic; the old state economies were subject to privatisation and foreign investment poured in. The old communist trading bloc collapsed, necessitating an opening to the world economy. The countries of the region signed Association Agreements with the EU, which would eventually result in EU membership in 2004 for the Baltic states, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia, while Romania and Bulgaria joined in 2007. The states of the former Yugoslavia will be next to join. Convertible currencies were introduced, and in the case of Slovenia and Slovakia the euro was adopted, a process which will be adopted elsewhere when conditions permit. Membership of NATO spread throughout the region.

However, there are still economic and social problems arising from the collapse of communism. There are considerable west/east divisions as the more prosperous western regions have a far higher standard of living. The old rust belts of the region still have high unemployment rates. The population had to learn a hard lesson: namely that the establishment of political independence does not result in economic independence, only interdependence. The fall of communism also saw more corruption and provided opportunities for criminal elements to flourish: who had heard of the trafficking of women from the region before 1989?

Overall, the death of communism is to be welcomed. Its legacy is complex, but in the establishment of democracy the people at least have a say. If a government fails to perform, it can be ousted – a scenario unthinkable in the repressive communist era.