



Conference of the Central Europe Forum in Vienna on 13 November 2020

The year 2020 is an anniversary year in Europe. Thirty years ago, the “Iron Curtain” that had cut across the European continent for decades dissolved thanks to the successful revolutions in the countries of Eastern and Central Europe. Countries and peoples regained freedom, the German nation was united, the Free State of Saxony re-emerged into history, and the European Union experienced its first “eastward expansion” as a result of German unification, so that it now included the area and population of the former GDR. From then on, Europe was no longer divided, indeed it was reunited, but it appears that it was not truly unified.

The year 2020 is a year of crisis in Europe. The European Union is at a historic crossroads. Britain’s withdrawal and the as yet unresolved questions regarding future relations, the rifts that have opened up between the member states on matters relating to the rule of law and democracy, the outstanding reforms in migration and asylum policy, a new, unfinished EU climate policy, the shaping of the digital future, issues over foreign policy sovereignty, and the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 – all these present the Union with immense challenges. This has been and continues to be overshadowed by the coronavirus pandemic which has swept across Europe, confronting all states with unprecedented problems and plunging the EU into an unparalleled crisis, but which also shows that the only remedy is one of joint European action.

With regard to the countries of Central Europe, the one development is to be seen against the background of the other. The experiences of political, economic and social transformation since 1989/1990 are of key significance in shaping current thinking and action. To that extent, the years 1989/1990 are still having an impact on the year 2020. Largely unseen by the “West”, they have a considerable influence on large parts of Europe and the EU. In what way exactly, is a question to be asked and answered by the 2020 conference of the Central Europe Forum.

Taking as its heading **Three Decades after “1989”: How should Europe move forward?**, the conference will consider two essential dimensions:

(1) Europe after the Corona Crisis – On the path towards a debt union?

The coronavirus pandemic is hitting Europe's countries and regions hard and its political, economic and social consequences are profound. It is not only costing thousands of lives and causing great economic damage. The Europe-wide shutdown, which placed a heavy burden on societies, also brought new problems to light and prompted behaviour that was thought to have been overcome. In addition to the lack of coordination at European level, the border closures, in particular, proved to be a source of tension. There was, and still is, a danger that the coronavirus crisis in Europe could turn into a crisis of confidence. On the one hand, this gives rise to such questions as: How has the pandemic been handled in Europe? What lessons can we learn from dealing with the pandemic in Europe? What are the implications for the future? On the other hand, consideration must be given to the questions: Which approach will be more favourable going forward, once the coronavirus crisis is over – that proposed by the "frugal" advocates of caution, who emphasize the exceptional character of the Recovery Plan for Europe, or that of the "spendthrifts", who now champion "corona bonds" and a debt union? How do the Central European countries view the European Recovery Plan and the Multiannual Financial Framework? Has the EU 2020 had its "Hamiltonian moment"? Does the management of this crisis provide impetus for concepts of a European federal state or a European fiscal or debt union? Or does it serve as an opportunity to readjust the patterns of cooperation in Europe, to make them future-proof and to develop the European Union in a sustainable way?

(2) A fresh start for Europe – 2020 as a second 1989?

The second theme ties in with the latter question and looks towards the future. The year 2020 represents a turning point in the European Union. First, the United Kingdom left the European Union on 31 January 2020. Then the coronavirus pandemic put the EU to an unexpectedly severe test. The disruptions and upheavals are not those of the years 1989/1990, but in 2020 considerable social and economic shockwaves again swept across the continent. The following questions seem worthy of discussion: Is it useful to draw parallels between 1989/1990 and 2020? Where does Europe stand three decades after "1989"? Can a crisis year like 2020 trigger a similarly fundamental change as the "epoch-making years" of 1989/1990? How and in which areas is there potential for further development of the European Union? What "strategic agenda" can it set itself? How is the associated second wave of transformation (in the digital, ecological, and economic spheres) viewed in the countries of Central Europe? What challenges and what opportunities exist today? What course has Germany been able to set in this regard during its EU Council Presidency? How is Europe dealing with the changes brought about by globalisation? How is it dealing with the global shift of power towards the "East" (the rise of China), away from the "West" (America's turning away from Europe)? How can the "West" regain the attractiveness it once had in Central Europe?