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European identity and heritage was now gone, allowing, in the words of Václav Havel (former President of Czechoslovakia and subsequently Czechia), [“the realistic hope that together we can return to Europe as free, independent and democratic nations”](#). For the Eastern European states, this idea of a return to Europe carried great resonance. Nevertheless, as the elation following the fall of the Berlin Wall and all that it symbolised began to subside, the challenges of such a process became clear.

Tentative transitions toward democracy and market economics were taking place in the Central and Eastern European countries, but the increasingly severe economic hardship experienced as a consequence was, by the early 1990s, also making itself felt. As Lech Wałsa (co-

This was a significant commitment on the part of the European Union. The incorporation of

## CEEC % GDP Growth, 1990-2020

Source: World Bank. World Development Indicators Database.

Politically, the process of democratisation was largely consolidated and stabilised, notwithstanding recent [backsliding in states such as Poland and Hungary](#). The aspiration for membership helped structure the democratic choices made by the CEECs, with it being notable that systems of parliamentary democracy were pursued, rather than the presidential structures concentrating power in the hands of individuals as was favoured by other Eastern bloc states such as Belarus, Russia, and the Central Asian republics. And while the transition to full democracy is yet to be completed by any of the eight CEECs – all were listed in the 2021 Democracy Index, for example as ‘Flawed Democracies’ (as was the United States) – by comparison to other states in the wider Central and Eastern European region, they have performed well: in 2021, the CEECs occupied the top 7 positions in the Democracy Index ranking for the region (with Hungary 10<sup>th</sup>), out of 28 states. The remaining three positions in the top 11 of the ranking are filled by other eastern Member States of the EU that have joined since 2004.

Beyond the consolidation and stabilisation of democratic transformation, membership in the

The European Union's symbolic attraction, representing a set of values and ideals (including democracy, human rights and the rule of law), and its perceived identity as a region of peace, prosperity and stability have made it a major pole of attraction for the states of the former eastern bloc. This pull has arguably been made stronger by the successful integration of the eight CEECs that were welcomed into the European family with the Union's first eastern enlargement on 1 May 2004. Almost two decades later, that is a path that has now been followed by three further eastern states – Bulgaria and Romania (in 2007) and Croatia (in 2013) – with five more at various stages along the road (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) and three submitting or intending to submit