



1989 - Europe's Annus Mirabilis

Focus

The two decades that have passed since Europe's revolutions of 1989 have only served to highlight the importance of those events. The Solidarity victory in Poland, people standing on the Berlin Wall and huge crowds on Prague's Wenceslas square, such images seemed impossible in the spring of that year. The end of the Soviet Empire in Central and Eastern Europe heralded the end of the Cold War and opened the door to Germany's unification and the uniting of independent states in a European Union.

Here we look at some of the events of that climatic year and speak to some people who experienced them first hand. From the symbolic cutting of the Iron Curtain in Hungary to the sight of millions of people holding hands across the Baltic States in protest at their annexation, the year saw millions of people seize their freedom through non-violent demonstrations.

1989: The year of revolutions - a look back 20 years on

Two decades ago the Soviet empire in Central and Eastern Europe dissolved as people took to the streets and Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev disavowed the use of force to rein in the protests. The countries behind the Berlin Wall have now come in from the proverbial political cold and joined the European Union in the last five years. Here we look at some of the events of that tumultuous summer of 1989.

Anti-Soviet riots in Berlin in 1953 and the Hungarian uprising in 1956 showed that the Sovietization of Central and Eastern Europe could not be achieved without a fight. It poisoned relations with the West; all economic and political cooperation ceased as the Iron Curtain split the continent.

Later, in 1968 in Prague and in Poland in the 1980s dissent would be crushed, although it left a lasting legacy of hope for change behind it. Below is a timeline of the unravelling of Moscow's empire in Europe.

1989 timeline:

February - April: Roundtable talks between the Polish Communist Party and the Solidarity protest movement.

March: About 80,000 demonstrators gather in Budapest to call for democracy. Opposition roundtable is formed in Hungary.

4 and 18 June: In Polish semi-free elections Solidarity win 99 of 100 seats in the Senate and all 161 Sejm seats allotted to Solidarity.

27 June: Austrian and Hungarian Foreign Ministers cut through the border fence on the border between Austria and Hungary.

19 August: Symbolic opening of the border between Austria and Hungary for three hours for a "Pan-European Picnic".

23 August: "Baltic Chain": Two million people join their hands to form a 600-kilometer long human chain across Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to draw attention to the fate of the Baltic countries and to mark the 50th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Germany and the Soviet Union, which led to the occupation of the three states.

24 August: Solidarity's Tadeusz Mazowiecki becomes Polish PM after the Communist candidate is unable to form a cabinet. The first non-Communist government in Communist Europe is formed.

11 September: Hungarian government announces that East German refugees would not be repatriated but instead be allowed to travel to the West. 13,000 East German refugees leave through Hungary to Austria and the Federal Republic of Germany.

9 October: Over 70,000 people demonstrate in the Eastern European city of Leipzig chanting "Wir sind das Volk" (We are the people).

18 October: Erich Honecker resigns in East Germany.

4 November: Over 1 million people gather for a demonstration on East Berlin's Alexanderplatz.

9 November: The Berlin Wall is breached and people stream westwards.

17 November: Czechoslovakia has its "Velvet Revolution": Mass demonstrations bring down Communist Government.

16 December: Protests break out in Timișoara, Romania as a response to the government's attempt to evict dissident pastor László Tőkés (now an MEP). Students spontaneously join the demonstrations and the protestors turn against party buildings. Later on protests spread to Bucharest; forcing Nicolae Ceausescu to flee.

25 December: Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife are executed.

The last rites of the USSR

The Soviet Union continued to spiral towards disintegration over the next two years. In 1990 Germany was reunited, whilst in Warsaw the leader of Solidarity, Lech Walesa, became President.

Finally in December 1991 the Hammer and Sickle was lowered from the Kremlin for the last time and the new flag of the Russian Federation was raised. The Soviet Union ceased to exist and the Commonwealth of Independent States was set up in its place.

Róża Thun on democratic changes in Central and Eastern Europe

“Even arrested, I was a free person” recalled her memories as a former dissident and Solidarnosc activist, currently MEP, Róża Thun in an exclusive interview to Europarl. Speaking to our website she told us why she does not like to speak about the ‘Fall of the Berlin Wall’ and how Poland has coped with its democratic transition. Read on to discover a truly Polish perspective to democratic changes 20 years ago.

Earlier you said you do not like the denomination ‘The Fall of the Berlin Wall’ to describe democratic changes that took place 20 years ago in Central and Eastern Europe. Why?

‘The Fall of the Berlin Wall’ is to my understanding a very symbolic and important German-German event. But what really changed Europe was that we together in Europe managed to dismantle the Iron Curtain, this terrible division of Europe. To me ‘fall’ or ‘collapse’ are verbs that would show our passivity, whereas it did not fall, we dismantled it with an enormous effort, courage, and vision on both sides of this Iron Curtain.

As a former Solidarnosc activist, you were personally involved in making the changes happen before 1989.

You know I am an old woman, and it’s a long story (laughs)...I was involved in the democratic movement as a so called dissident already in the 70s, before Solidarnosc. A moment came in my youth, I was still at University, when together with friends we realized that we are responsible for what is happening around us; that we are not objects, but subjects; i.e. that we want and can decide what is going on. We realized that we can have influence without hoping of course that Europe would change so much within one lifespan and Poland would become a free democratic country and a member of the European Union.

At least, we those groups who opposed to the Communist dictatorship, we were free people, we were normal in this completely abnormal political system. And that was already a luxury, even if we paid a prize. I was a spokesperson of a student organization that was called Student Committee for Solidarity, which had existed even before Solidarnosc, and those milieus backed the trade unions and the bigger movements which arose later.

I must say that even if it was a very difficult time; we were constantly followed by the secret police and frequently arrested, I have very good memories. I was free, even if arrested, I understood and learned a lot, I had wonderful friends, and I live today in a Europe that realised more than my most daring dreams from those times. In addition, I have the luxury to allow myself to admit that I have some, even if very humble, input in this good development.

Looking back 20 years, which one of your expectations were met, and what caused you disappointment?

There are always disappointments and there are groups of people who did not manage. Passing from a closed world to a totally opened free market economy was a huge challenge. Poland goes through constant changes. For the last 20 years everything has changed, not only in domestic but also external politics; for example when you look at the map of Europe all neighbours of Poland changed: to the East we had the Soviet Union that does not exist, to the South we had Czechoslovakia that does not exist and to the West we had GDR, it does not exist.

Our everyday life went through tremendous changes too. The social system in Poland is not developed and rich enough to take care of those who were not able to cope with the changes. So there are some people who are frustrated. But Poles in general are just the opposite of frustrated. Also in the opinion polls, they are happy about their lives, about political decisions like joining the EU. They have very good results in economy - for the time being the best of Europe. They are extremely hard-working and they see the good results of this hard work.

What’s your message for the new generation?

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Live in an active way, be involved, when you grow older it will be very important for you to look back and see that you have left some positive traces on Europe. The old generation always says: when we were young, the youth was better. I hate to hear that; if we were better, we would not have allowed those systems to survive so long.

Not only is the next generation good, but they live in blessed times; I would wish them to wake up in the morning, smile to the time in which they live, enjoy it and feel the responsibility for it. Those developments can only continue for the better with their total involvement in the world around them: be it their commune, school, parish, University, region, national or European politics. I wish them to marry, to have children, to live a normal happy life and pass this optimism and responsibility to the next generation.

Anniversaries this year: From the Hitler-Stalin Pact to the fall of the Berlin Wall

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact between Hitler and Stalin to split parts of Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic States between them, but it is also 20 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Opening a conference commemorating the pact, European Parliament President Jerzy Buzek focused on how far Europe has come. He said to those present that "we live in a different Europe today of which the essence has to be solidarity".

European Commission Vice-President Jacques Barrot told the conference that the pact had created "a terrible conjunction of two totalitarian regimes - Nazism and Communism". The event was organised by the National Parliaments of the Baltic States in the European Parliament on 14 October.

"A common historical narrative

The conference focused on the need to unite Europe's histories and consolidate understanding of the past. "More than ever we need to speak with one voice when we talk as the EU to the outside world," Mr Buzek said.

Aivars Stranga, a historian from the University of Latvia, said that the lack of shared memory causes problems of understanding and can even be an obstacle in creating a common future. "The European Union should have a common historical narrative" he said.

Speakers called for international cooperation to come up with ways to increase knowledge about history and Estonian MEP Mart Laar called for a new history manual for schools.

Destruction of the Wall - destruction of a prison

The Berlin Wall fell 20 years ago, but some speakers wondered whether the West really understands what happened in the countries behind the wall during the previous 50 years.

Lithuanian MP Vytautas Landsbergis said that "the build-up of two Europes – that of democracy and that Soviet one – was finalised with the appearance of the grim and bloody Berlin Wall."

He said that the countries which joined the EU five years ago were "in an enormous prison that extended over Central and Eastern Europe and contained hundreds of millions of captive people". He went on to say: "The destruction of the Wall was also a destruction of a prison and a denouncement of the political-cultural division of Europe."

West and East - a meeting of minds?

Many speakers said that Western Europe doesn't understand the consequences of the dark period of Communist rule for millions of people on the other side of Iron Curtain and the crimes committed under that regime.

The problem arises when trying to compare two totalitarian regimes, said Kazimierz Wojcicki of Warsaw University. "We can't allow any comparison between the Holocaust and Stalin's regime" he said.

Camilla Andersson from the Institute for Information on the Crimes of Communism in Sweden said there is knowledge gap in the West, with many people thinking that the Berlin Wall was built by the Nazis.

Conference members said that it is important to share experiences and opinions in the EU.

Werner Schulz: the power of words and memories

In an exclusive interview to coincide with the anniversary of events in 1989, we spoke to German Green Werner Schulz who saw the crowds gather to topple the iconic Berlin Wall and with it overthrow the East German regime in a cold November 20 years ago. He tells us of the events that day as a 39-year-old scientist and opposition activist and also what it feels like to have fought for freedom and democracy.

What do you remember about 9 November, 1989, when more than 1 million people demonstrated in Berlin?

This was the first free event of importance that I experienced in Berlin. People came from everywhere with incredibly creative and provocative banners, slogans and caricatures.

It was rumoured that the Stasi (the East German secret police) would cause an incident in front of the Brandenburg Gate to justify violent repression of the demonstration. That is why many friends of the opposition group "New Forum" (of which he was a founding member) wore sashes saying "No to violence". They were placed everywhere to prevent provocation.

On November 9, 1989, when the Wall fell, was it knocked down or were there already cracks?

The border was breached on 9 November, it was only later that it fell. The Iron Curtain was pierced that day, not by chance, but thanks to pressure from the street.

People were mobilised, everything was moving and that is why they flocked to the border crossing, after the opening of the border was announced on television.

Before, they would have been shot. But the soldiers were confused and the tension grew and grew. People were shouting: "Open, open!" They opened the border and people rushed to West Berlin.

Regardless of the wall, did the system collapse in on itself?

No, the system was overthrown. Regimes do not collapse like that by themselves. All those who say that the GDR was at its end are wrong. The regimes in North Korea and Cuba are maintained even though things are going from bad to worse for the people. Compared to Romania for example, people lived quite well in the old GDR. Nothing would have collapsed on its own. The regime was overthrown.

The problem was that it was impossible to stop people from taking to the streets. The first major unauthorised demonstration on October 9 in Leipzig made the political authorities impotent. For the first time they were unable to prevent a demonstration. This gave people the courage to do the same thing and we saw more demonstrations everywhere. The pressure continued and the ruling Communist SED party was forced to issue new rules governing the right to travel.

Erich Honecker announced in early 1989 that the wall would stay for another 50 or 100 years, while the reasons for its presence remained. But the only reasons for the wall were the SED and to stop people fleeing the GDR. And when the Iron Curtain became porous, it sounded the death knell for the SED.

Was the fact that the demonstrations were not suppressed as in Tiananmen square due to a decision by the East German leadership or an accident of history?

It's hard to say. On the one hand, officials threatened to crush the democratic movement like at Tiananmen and praised their "Chinese comrades." On the other hand, I'm not sure they really wanted something similar. The "old school" who had lived under Stalin would not have hesitated to stifle the revolution. Others were more hesitant. At the same time, a sort of palace revolution took place, so the chain of command failed.

In Leipzig on October 9, batons would not have been enough to stop 70,000 people. The police could have fired and it would have ended in a bloodbath. They waited for orders from above. But those above hesitated. The demonstrators, who despite their fears defied the ban, emerged victorious in this showdown.

What meaning do the events of 1989 have for you as an MEP?

Of course, it marks one deeply having won freedom and democracy oneself. Unlike West Germany, this is not something that we just received. I think people perceive the value of freedom and democracy very differently when they have been desired for years.

Also I am very sensitive to the situation in Eastern Europe and I worked a lot on the Russian problem, where there are people who are in a situation like the one we were in the GDR. Sometimes the situation is even worse because they are there for violence, it is not just bullying but a series of murders.

That is why I advocated and worked towards the Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of thought being given to the Memorial Association this year.

Former Luxembourg PM and MEP Jacques Santer on the fall of the Berlin Wall

"The day after the Wall fell, there were plenty of 'Trabis' at the Luxembourg border," recalls Jacques Santer, former President of the European Commission, and Prime Minister of Luxembourg, speaking exclusively to us about the events of 1989. He said the East Germans wanted to come and see Radio Luxembourg as it was a symbol of "peace and liberty".

How do you remember the events of 1989? Were you involved in any way?

At the time I was Prime Minister of Luxembourg and in 1990 we held the presidency of the European Union. We were surprised and excited like everyone else at the time by the break out of East Germans that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall. But before that we already knew that there were other such events, like those in Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia.

The day after the Wall fell, there were plenty of "Trabis" (East German cars) at the Luxembourg border and Luxembourg customs officials called me asking what they should do with these cars which didn't have visas - many of the people in them wanted to see Radio Luxembourg. So I let them in, they got to see the Radio and then they had to go because they weren't authorised to stay.

Thereafter, there was much discussion and dissension among Christian Democrats. As Chairman of the EPP, I called a summit of Christian Democrats in Pisa, an initiative that was little known elsewhere, where we agreed to get behind German Chancellor Helmut Kohl to have a strategy to defend German unification.

Twenty years after the fall of the wall and seen from Western Europe, how do you see the situation now? Have the reforms succeeded?

I think it's been a success story. Of course, it also created new problems, because it required considerable efforts. I am still proud of two events when I was President of the Commission: firstly, given the crisis of today, the introduction of the euro on 1 January 1999. We do not know what the EU would be now without the euro; and secondly, for being the first Commission to set the enlargement strategy, which led to the enlargement in 2004 and 2007. I am very happy to have contributed in this way to the unification of our continent in peace and freedom.

Summer of 1989: MEPs remember the Baltic Way

Twenty years ago this August, two million people joined hands across 600 kilometres and three countries to mark 50 years since the Nazi-Soviet pact delivered Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia into forced Soviet rule. It was part of a series of events that swept the Communist bloc in the summer of 1989 which resulted in the election of Poland's Solidarność movement and the symbolic fall of the Berlin Wall in November. Some MEPs who held hands during the Baltic Way share their memories of those days.

Baltic Way "has not lost its symbolic meaning"

Recently elected **Latvian MEP Sandra Kalniete** was born in Siberia where her family had been deported during the Soviet occupation.

Speaking about the events that took place in the summer of 1989 she told us: "Twenty years later, I am still moved by any mention of the Baltic Way. It has not lost its symbolic meaning. It is a legend today, and it can be compared to Mahatma Ghandi's non-violent opposition."

She went on to say that "may Europe never again be split by the Iron Curtain and may the continent never again be pursued by fear of its neighbours".

Black ribbon to mark pact

The former leader of Lithuania's independence movement turned **MEP Vytautas Landsbergis** spoke of how his country remembers the sad anniversary of the pact. "In Lithuania the International Black Ribbon day reminding of the shameful Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact has been publicly commemorated since 1987."

Pondering on the importance of the event he added: "The Baltic Way was sending an obvious message of goodwill to the world, namely: we are demanding freedom and will peacefully take it, violence and injustice has to come to an end!"

"Deserves a place in history"

Estonian MEP Tunne Kelam remembers being part of the Baltic chain holding hands with people on the road to the Estonian Parliament - the Toompea. At that point in time he was a key player in the National Independence Party which was the major non-Communist political party in Estonia.

Mr Kelam told us: "In 1989 the Baltic States were occupied by hundred of thousands Soviet soldiers. Considering the conditions, the citizen's initiative to organise a chain of 2 million people is unique. It deserves a place in the history of repressed nations."

Poland, August '89: First non-Communist government

In the summer of 1989 events in Poland were also accelerating the end of Communist rule. Free elections were held in June and on 24 August Solidarność member Tadeusz Mazowiecki became the first non-Communist leader in Central and Eastern Europe since the war.

Outgoing Liberal MEP and former Solidarność press spokesman **Janusz Onyszkiewicz** spoke to us about those events and of the uncertainty over how the Kremlin would then react given the previous 'Brezhnev doctrine' of supporting fellow Communist states: "We had some signals from the Soviet Union, from the pioneers of Glasnost and Perestroika, that this doctrine is not likely to remain in force, but no one was really sure. It was like with the dead lion – everyone around can say it's dead, but someone has to step up and drag its tail to check it."

He went on to elaborate on the consequences of the first non-Communist government for other States behind the Iron curtain: "When Poland rejected Communism, it became clear that soon the question of the status of DDR would arise and that the Berlin Wall would collapse eventually. We were talking about it with Chancellor Helmut Kohl during his visit in Poland in November 1989. Kohl did not believe, but on the next day he had to head back to Germany, because the Wall just had fallen."

A **YouTube film** below of the Baltic Way shows people linking hands across the Baltic States in 1989.

Nazi-Soviet pact, August '39

- USSR given free hand in Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and parts of Poland and Romania
- Nazi Germany given free hand in Poland, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, Yugoslavia and Greece
- 1-3 September 1939: German invasion of Poland. Britain and France declare war on Germany
- 22 June 1941: Germany invades the USSR
- 1991: Soviet Union collapses

On this day: 27 June - the Iron Curtain was breached

The first breach of the Iron Curtain which divided Communist Central and Eastern Europe from the West for over decades took place 20 years ago today. Just outside the Hungarian town of Sopron, Austrian Foreign Minister Alois Mock joined his Hungarian counterpart Gyula Horn in cutting the fence on 27 June 1989. It led to a stream of people heading west and climaxed in the fall of the Berlin Wall in November that year. On this day MEPs from both countries share their thoughts and memories.

The physical barrier that divided Europe was originally installed to stop the tide of people fleeing Soviet rule in the east. An estimated 15 million people headed west in the five years after 1945.

The phrase "Iron Curtain" was coined by Winston Churchill in his famous speech at Fulton, Missouri in 1946. Standing next to US President Harry Truman he said: "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an 'iron curtain' has descended across the Continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe - Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia."

"The power of freedom knows no borders"

József Szájer is a Hungarian Member of the European Parliament originally from Sopron. In the 1980's he was a pro-democracy activist. He told us that he first crossed over the border when he was 20 years old.

He told us that "those who breached the border at Sopronpuszta 20 years ago accomplished one of the most outstanding historic events of the 20th century. The Pan-European picnic (a peace demonstration) reminds us of the fact that the power of freedom knows no borders".

Mr Szájer also spoke of the need for people from the west to remember what the division of Europe was like: "I handed over a piece of the Iron Curtain to EP President Hans-Gert Pöttering and Commission President José Manuel Barroso. I gave it to European politicians whose countries have been living in freedom for a longer time than ours so as to remind them every day that even the most oppressive regimes can be overthrown."

"It was like in 1956"

Outgoing Austrian MEP Christa Prets was someone who remembers those events well. From 1987 to 1999, she was Mayor and Councillor in Burgenland, the Austrian State that borders Hungary. She told us: "There was a fascination. It was the same like in 1956 when the Hungarians were coming, and wanted to be free. It was a historical moment for the whole region."

"We especially in the border region had many advantages from the opening of the border. Today, if you need some documents related to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, then you need to go to the archive of Sopron, that was the biggest city in Burgenland at a time, a thing which you could not do before without waiting for hours at the Iron Curtain" she said.

June 1989: "left me and my friends quite stunned"

Gisela Kallenbach was a German civil rights activist and an MEP between 2004 and 2009. Growing up in East Germany she was not allowed to take her school "Abitur" exam due to her social background and her Christian denomination.

She told us of her reaction: "What happened in June 1989 at the Austrian-Hungarian border left me and my friends quite stunned. Why? Firstly because none of us had imagined that we would see the iron curtain disappear in our life times. And secondly because we had to fear that now an even greater number of our friends, family members and colleagues would leave for the Golden West."

She went on: "I was one of those who in autumn 1989 were shouting 'we are staying' in response to the rallying cry 'we want to get out'. In the end, cutting the border fence was an important step on the path towards a free democracy and a united Germany. Therefore one needs to thank the Hungarian government of the time for its courage."

Europe divided 1945-1989

- "Iron Curtain" coined by Churchill in 1946.
- Built to stop westward exodus from Soviet rule.
- Between 1945 and 1950, over 15 million people fled Soviet rule in Central and Eastern Europe
- Between 1950 and 1990, due to the Iron Curtain, only 13.3 million people emigrated westward.