



40 years on: Europe and the legacy of 1968

The events of 1968 shook post-war Europe and are still be analysed and spoken about today - a tribute to their enduring importance. Protests in Paris during the May days were the most famous although similar protest events resonated east and west across Europe. In Czechoslovakia the Prague Spring gave us "socialism with a human face" whilst in Poland students protested for reform before Soviet rule crushed dissent. Forty years on we asked a few MEPs for their recollections of that fateful year.

Paris '68 seen by a 24 year old future MEP

Paris in May 1968 was the scene of demonstrations which shook the Fifth Republic. Future president of the European Parliament Nicole Fontaine was living in the Latin Quarter of the city during those days. She recalls: "I was 24 and had just finished my studies at the Institut des Sciences Politiques - I was also expecting my first child". She told us that due to the imminent arrival of her child she was more of an "observer of events rather than a participator".

Ms Fontaine - who still sits in the Strasbourg assembly for the centre right EPP-ED group, said the slogans of '68 "irritated and continue to irritate" the upper classes of French society. For her, the people - in particular the students - were reacting to what they saw as the "archaic and unbearable" French society. For her the legacy was a "catharsis" in French society which led to changes which would have inevitably occurred, but thanks to '68 change came with "more convulsions".

Prague Spring to Soviet Winter: the flight from Prague

The events of 1968 had an impact on both sides of the iron curtain. In Czechoslovakia the Prague Spring of liberalisation and Alexander Dubček's "socialism with a human face" flourished before Soviet tanks ended all hope of reform.

One of those who fled to the west after the Soviet invasion was current Green MEP Milan Horáček. He went to Frankfurt and now represents Germany in the European Parliament. He recalls that "as Czechoslovak political refugees, we found support by those who rejected both capitalism and communism. But of course we were less enthusiastic about the leftist idealism of some of the activists, because we have seen how socialism actually looks in reality".

In terms of the political legacy of '68 in the west and Germany in particular, Mr Horáček sees the election of openly gay mayors, a coalition of greens and conservatives in Hamburg and the involvement of more women in politics as processes which "have their roots in the events of 1968". He told us that "before that public life was much more conservative and such things were simply unthinkable". For his native Czechoslovakia

he sees the memories of '68 leading to the dissident movement "Charter 77" and the eventual "Velvet" revolution in 1989.

Poland's student protest: "workers did not support it"

In neighbouring Poland the spring of 1968 saw students revolt against the Communist government in favour of political reform and more freedom of speech. Bronisław Geremek is a Polish historian and now serves as a Liberal MEP. He told us that he finds it "hard to find a common denominator" with the 1968 events in France, Germany, Italy and in the US. He believes they "differed in specifics and their goals were not alike. However, all of the movements were about freedom".

Speaking about the differences between the events of '68 in Poland and the later "Solidarity" movement, Geremek says that "1968 in Poland was purely an intellectual initiative. Other social groups, namely workers, did not support it". He says the experience of that year was present later in Solidarity and that "the valuable experience of 1968 was mainly negative". However, he says that it did "wake up" society and lead ultimately to the fall of the Soviet system.

Turning to Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia he says that prior to that people still believed that socialism could be "revised and reformed". According to Geremek this sentiment was dispelled just as it had been in Budapest in 1956 when the Hungarian revolution was crushed by the Soviet Union.

1968 belongs to history

From the perspective of four decades later, 1968 clearly marked a significant shift in European history, albeit taking different forms on each side of the iron curtain, and indeed varying sharply between different countries on the two sides. These changes played a great role in the shaping of today's reunited Europe represented in the European Parliament. The debate will continue as to the precise nature of the legacy, while many now say the time has come to look forward rather than back.

One of the most important student leaders of the period, current Green MEP Daniel Cohn-Bendit, believes that 1968 should be finally shelved. On the 15th of April he was quoted as saying that "it happened once upon a time. Constantly replaying the debate of 1968 does not bring us any further. Sixty-eight has changed the world, if you like it or not. But today society is different and therefore we need a different debate."