

## Memory, European Identity and the Year 1989

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Is there such a thing as a European? Or are we simply dealing with Germans, French, or Poles within Europe? Does Europe create our identity, or is it just a space within which we develop our national identities and simultaneously organize our daily lives?

Poor participation in the European Parliamentary elections raises doubts as to whether people in Europe actually understand themselves to be Europeans. Can "Europe", or in this case, the European Union, exist in the long term as an artificial construct for coping with life's challenges if the people of Europe do not accept it as their own? When we answer these questions in the negative and consequently conclude that Europe or Europeans cannot exist in the long run, must we not draw the conclusion that there is a European identity to be created? Or is identity something that can even be created, like a sanitation policy, and if so, who is responsible for doing so?

These questions may appear superficial at first glance, but they are of considerable importance in practice. The greatest danger threatening the EU is that it lose the acceptance of its citizens. This would cause more than just a blemish on the EU's image. International organizations can exist without the enthusiasm or approval of the citizens of their member states, but this is not true of supranational organizations, which are based upon common solidarity and the surrender of absolute national sovereignty.

Identity is constituted from commonalities which arise, for example, from language, life situation, history, culture or tradition. These commonalities, however, can only create identity when they are perceived and accepted as being shared. Therefore, there have been time and again active attempts to produce identities, as we can observe, for example, in recent years in the former Soviet Central Asian republics. Identity brings people together ("We are we"), but alongside inclusion it also has a powerful exclusionary aspect ("We are who we are, because we are different from the others"). Identity essentially binds people into communities by excluding others – so long as one abandons the construction of the "world citizen", which in any case has no real practical meaning.

This should make it clear that the question of European identity is a particularly difficult one. Indeed, there are countless commonalities between EU peoples on which we could focus, from the currency (Euro) to the single European market and area of freedom, security and justice, to the standardized passports and license plates, but there are also important differences. Twenty three official languages are spoken in the EU, though in reality there are considerably more. Furthermore, the common history which Europe of course shares is often perceived as disjunctive; it is, if nothing else, a history of inter-communal wars. It is likewise not to be maintained that people in Lapland and Sicily, in Portugal or Poland are the same or even look the same. This is partially attributable to events this which did not just change daily realities, but also reached people emotionally and anchored themselves in their memories and feelings. Does 1989 have this quality? Is it the source of common European memory? Could the events of 1989 have the effect of producing a common identity?

The year 1989 has a significant meaning in European history – and in contrast to other pivotal years in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, a positive one. We Germans naturally think predominantly of the fall of the Berlin Wall. This was, however, only one element of the fundamental transformation which Europeans brought to their continent in this year. Throughout Central Eastern Europe, liberation movements claimed victory over antiquated Communist Party dictators. Indeed, the first stones were removed from the wall long before November 9, 1989. The Polish trade union “Solidarnosc” (“Solidarity”) became more and more successful despite the Communist Party, and forced about the partially-democratic elections which took place in June 1989 and allowed Poles for the first time to cast their votes for opposition candidates to the Parliament. In fact, Poland's ruling United Workers' Party would presumably have vanished into thin air had it not stipulated a quota of seats in Parliament in advance. The Party's demise was, however, already set in motion and came to a close quickly thereafter. Change was also initiated in Hungary, where at the start of 1989 the Communist Party abdicated it's claim to power and a multi-party system was born. In September 1989, the People's Republic became the Republic of Hungary.

The Hungarian leadership were also no longer willing to serve as prison guards for the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Hungarians themselves had long enjoyed a relative freedom of travel, and the strict surveillance of the Austrian border took place namely in the interest of the unloved German and Romanian brother parties. In May 1989, Hungary began – literally, since it was a matter of chain link fence - to tear down the Iron Curtain. In June 1989, Hungarian Foreign Minister Gyula Horn and his Austrian colleague, Alois Mock, contributed personally in front of a television audience. Although Hungary continued to not allow GDR citizens to pass into the West, more and more GDR tourists staying in Hungary used their vacations as opportunities to escape. That this happened

surprised no one. Captured GDR citizens were transported back across the border, but they normally did not face any more serious consequences.

In August 1989, the Pan-European Movement – which emerged under the leadership of the eldest son of the last Austrian Emperor, Otto von Habsburg – organized a European picnic in Sopron on the Austro-Hungarian border. In order that the Austrian and Hungarian participants could meet each other, the border was opened for several hours. Hundreds of GDR citizens who were invited to the event by leaflets used the border opening as an opportunity to flee. What happened spontaneously, however, had in actuality been carefully orchestrated by the Pan-European Movement and Hungarian government. Shortly after this mass exodus, Hungary changed its official policy and allowed persons with valid passports to leave the country for whichever destinations they wished, including allowing GDR citizens to travel to Austria.

In Czechoslovakia, the “Velvet Revolution” displaced the country's old rulers. In December, Communist Party head of state Gustáv Husák resigned. A few weeks later, the civil rights activist Václav Havel was named as his successor and Alexander Dubcek, the icon of Prague Spring in 1968, became Speaker of the Czech Federal Parliament. The revolution did not succeed, however, in holding Czechoslovakia together; since 1993 the Czech and Slovak Republics have gone their separate ways.

Transformation also began in the Baltic states, then still Soviet Republics. On August 23, 1989, the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, hundreds of thousands of people formed a “Baltic human chain” which stretch from Tallinn, Estonia to Vilnius, Lithuania. The Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians proclaimed themselves in a declaration to be Europe's last colonies and preached a “Baltic Way” - the way to Europe. In 1990 the three states declared their independence and carried out the “Singing Revolution”, which even a violent Soviet counterrevolution in 1991 could not stop. Change was brewing in Bulgaria as well. On the day after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Party leader Todor Zhirkov fell from power. In early 1990, free elections were also held in Yugoslavia, which had long been lampooned as the 16<sup>th</sup> Soviet Republic due to its particular political closeness to Moscow.

The democratic movements in Central Eastern Europe were made possible not in the least by the reforms which were being implemented in Moscow, the political center of socialist power. Already in 1985, the relatively young Party functionary Mikhail Gorbachev was elected General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). He saw clearly that his country was not competitive and devoted his efforts to reform with the buzzword “Perestroika” (reorganization). This could only occur, according to Gorbachev's correct assertion, if members of society also had relevant information at their disposal, thus also necessitating “Glasnost” (openness). In addition, Gorbachev suspended the Brezhnev doctrine, under which the sovereignty of member states in the socialist camp was limited,

effectively ending the right of intervention which the Soviet Union had asserted in 1953 in the GDR, 1956 in Poland and Hungary and in 1968 in Czechoslovakia. Hencefore, according to Gorbachev's confidant Alexander Yakovlev, the "Frank Sinatra Doctrine" would be in effect – a play on the Sinatra song, "I did it my way!".

The new policies of the Soviet leadership did not just arrive in Central Eastern Europe during an ongoing grassroots movement for democracy, but also created an enormous legitimacy problem for the ruling political elite. The grand Soviet Union was suddenly no longer a role model. While it had long held in the GDR that, "To learn from the Soviet Union is to learn to be victorious," SED Politburo member Kurt Hager now snarled that a man must not redecorate his apartment just because his neighbor does so. The highpoint of the legitimacy crisis and simultaneous disclosure of helplessness came in November 1988 when the GDR government blocked the importation of the Soviet magazine, "Sputnik".

In December 1989, the last authoritarian bastion in Central Eastern Europe fell when the Romanian opposition managed to remove the "Conducator" (Leader) Nicolae Ceaușescu. Absurd scenes played out in Bucharest. Ceaușescu wanted to speak to his people, but was booed at by thousands of listeners. At first he failed to understand the demonstration which was occurring before him, and in the end he had to be evacuated by helicopter from the roof of the Party building. A few days later he was condemned to death in an obscure trial and shot along with his wife and co-perpetrator, Elena.

1989 was also the beginning of a downright revolutionary transformation which would change the map of Europe in the long term, as is illustrated by our eastern neighbor. Poland, which itself transformed from People's Republic to Republic, has seven direct neighboring countries, all of which are new since 1989/1991: Lithuania, Belarus and the Ukraine are former parts of the Soviet Union, as was Russia, which borders on Poland in the Kalingrad region, while the Czech Republic and Slovakia were formerly Czechoslovakia and the Federal Republic of Germany along the western Polish border was formerly the GDR. The East-West conflict dissipated, some of the Warsaw Pact countries joined NATO and today the European Union counts nine former "Eastern Block" states in it's ranks - in addition to Slovenia, which emerged from the collapse of Yugoslavia.

With the dawning of this new era, Europe became the destination; former civil rights activist and later Czechoslovakian and Czech president Vaclav Havel named the transformation of the Central European states a "return to Europe". European identity was adopted in a double sense, before it's foundation would even be laid through the realization of factual similarities. Only Germany went through a different process, which has left traces which can be seen even today in the low European

affinity of East Germans. In Warsaw and Prague people set out towards Europe, yet in Leipzig and Dresden it was towards a united Germany, leaving “Europe” distant to many.

Nonetheless, one must recognize that 1989 was not a year of upheaval for many Europeans. In Great Britain and Belgium, Sweden and Portugal they know of the date and are aware of the fact that it indirectly influenced their own lives (for example, through the expansion of the EU and the flow of subsidies to the new member states), but this historical moment could hardly be productive of a new identity.

Furthermore, the emotional content of 1989 is being increasingly lost. The generation currently leaving our schools and even universities does not consider the events of 1989/91 as mainly a transformation, but rather as the starting point of their lives. They take for granted the chances which arose from this transformation, and unlike older persons even twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, they do not find anything unusual about meeting Polish students in Amsterdam or German students in Sofia. It is not 1989 in itself that is productive of identity for the “89 Generation”, but rather it’s results: the single European market, freedom of movement, the European-wide Bologna Process.

The process of transformation also occurred differently in Russia, a European and not insignificant land. The starting point there was not so much the acquisition of freedom, but rather the loss of meaning that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union. When Vladimir Putin today contends that the breaking up of the Soviet Union was the greatest catastrophe of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, he is received with only stunned disapproval in the West. The 1990s remain in memory as a decade of chaos for Russians, with overburdened Presidents and the brutal accumulation of wealth by a few at the cost of the many.

While we may like to think that the 1989/91 transformation was also beneficial for Russia, Russians are not so convinced. What makes Putin and his President Medvedev so beloved in their own country is their attempt to turn back the wheel of history, thus making 1989/91 forgotten. This is a source of constant tension in relations between Russia and the EU. Such turbulences are politically regrettable, but appear at first glance to be useful for the creation of a European identity, since identity arises namely, as previously noted, through exclusion and not inclusion. A communities' own commonalities first became visible in comparison to others; identity does not answer the question of who belongs to “us”, but rather who does not.

Who are “the others”? Is it enough for Europeans to demarcate themselves from Russia and should we even wish for this politically? There can be no solution to our continent’s diverse problems – from the supply of energy to the conflict in Transnistria – without Russia. At present this is also unfortunately not

possible with Russia, but do we really want to aggravate current conditions through the solidification of anti-Russian markers of identity? Who else are “the others”? Now that George W. Bush has resigned himself to his Texas ranch, the United States of America do not appear to be suited for such a disassociation. Could Islam serve the purpose of distinguishing us from the others, despite the fact that millions of Muslims live in EU and are citizens of its member states? Or are we confusing an entire religion here with a particular fundamentalist interpretation, namely Islamism, and therefore flailing at a caricature?

The year 1989 can serve as a guide to these questions. 1989 was the dawn of freedom and is thereby our criterion for demarcation. Alongside those things which constitute commonalities (geography and common institutions, climate, culture, traditions and markets), there are those that mark our differences: freedom and the lack thereof, respectively. It is on this basis that Europe can surely unite itself, irregardless of how directly individual persons were impacted by the revolutions. Freedom makes the difference. Part and parcel of this freedom is tolerance, which Angela Merkel described as the soul of Europe in her notable address to the European Parliament in 2007.

The challenge for political education is thereby also fixed. By making freedom and tolerance fundamental topics, education further contributes to the creation of a European identity. 1989 can play a role in this and can be classified along with the democratic upheavals and transformations that Europe has lived through since 1789, including the bourgeois revolution in 1848 in Germany and other European countries and the Portuguese Carnation Revolution in 1974. It was not the events of 1989, but rather the integration of these upheavals in the tradition of the European freedom movements which pulls Europe together and makes Spain's overcoming of the Franco dictatorship as well as the dissolution of communist one-party rule in Poland shared European occurrences. Our personal memory of 1989 may help us to understand our hopes and emotions, but it should thus not be the focus of our historical perspective.