

‘1989, the happiest year in European history’: Cooperation is humanity’s only promising option

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It has been rightly pointed out that the fall of the Berlin Wall was an event of extraordinary significance that extended far beyond Germany. What was actually the point of building this Wall? Two systems were competing on German soil: the free, democratic Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) with its market economy, on one side, and, on the other side, the socialist system of the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

The construction of the Wall by the GDR leadership was an admission of defeat in the battle between the two systems. People wanted to escape from what they considered the wrong system in order to be able to move to what they regarded as the right system and to live there in freedom. Thus, the impact of the decision to construct the Berlin Wall went far beyond the city.

Richard von Weizsäcker once said when he was Federal President: 'German history has never belonged to us alone'. Thomas Mann expressed this in 1953 in his famous address to young Germans when he said: 'What we want is a European Germany and not a German Europe'. This was Germany turning to Europe, and it is perhaps symbolic that Chancellor Helmut Kohl and I experienced the fall of the Wall not in Bonn, not in Berlin, but in Warsaw, where we were visiting the new Polish leadership formed by Solidarność, and while we were having dinner the news came: 'The Berlin Wall has been opened'.

I will never forget how I met Lech Wałęsa and his foreign policy adviser Bronislaw Geremek the following morning. And Geremek said: 'The fall of the Wall represents a great day for Germany because it means unity, Mr. Genscher, for your country. But it is also a great day for Poland. If Germany is unified, Poland will have the European Community as a neighbour'. Today Poland is a member of that community.

The Wall divided not only Germans from Germans, not only Berliners from Berliners, but also Europeans from Europeans. We know today that the fall of the Wall was a historic event that overcame the division of the world. But it was not the end of history. History allows no respite and no time to pause. The world took a short break all the same, although it must be said that there were two statesmen who in 1988 and 1989 read the signs of the times correctly.

There was Mikhail Gorbachev who spoke before the United Nations in December 1988 of the great challenges facing humanity, namely safeguarding natural resources, overcoming hunger and poverty in the developing world and putting an end to the arms race. And there was President George Bush of the United States of America who declared in 1990 that a new world order was emerging.

Happiest year

However, long before this, thought had been given as to how what divided us could be overcome in the Cold War era. The fact is that co-operation within the CSCE and the OSCE had an indispensable role to play in our being able to experience 1989 as perhaps the happiest year in European history.

Was it not the case that, in that autumn of 1989, the people of Europe were more united in their hopes and their fears, in their concerns and their desires, closer to one another than ever before in their history? That is the message from those times that we must honour as it falls on us today to tackle the issue of a new, future structure, not only for Europe but for the great trans-Atlantic area from Vancouver to Vladivostok as a common task.

There was also the historic departure of 1975, which had begun with the Helsinki Final Act. Countries that stood on opposing sides under the rules of the Cold War and at a time of ideological and military confrontation on a scale undreamed of, came together in Helsinki and now endeavoured to achieve a minimum of consensus.

If we read the Helsinki Final Act, we can see that it is a masterpiece in balancing interests — an agreement on the principles of the co-existence of human beings and nations, an understanding that we can only find common ground if we are prepared to talk to one another and work together, and that there are human emotions, desires and needs, and human dignity that command respect. All of these were included in the CSCE's third basket of humanitarian issues.

Let us look back once again, to what had taken place before this: On 17 June 1953 in the GDR, a people's uprising crushed by Soviet tanks, in 1956 in Hungary, in 1968 in Czechoslovakia, and also the measures against Solidarność, without Soviet intervention, and then the groundbreaking development that was 1989.

None of this would have been possible without the provision of the Helsinki Final Act enabling civil rights campaigners to point out to their own Governments that they had signed up to certain commitments, that they had agreed that the Final Act was not to be hidden away in the archives of foreign ministries but should be made available to every citizen and published in the press, that none of this would become a reality overnight, but that they had committed themselves to introducing a process that would make this possible.

New door

I remember those critical days of the CSCE follow-up conference in Madrid (1980- 1983) after a Korean plane had been shot down, and the meeting was on the verge of breaking down. And then we remembered: If one has achieved something of value, if one is sitting at the table to talk about issues, this should never be interrupted. This was the historic importance of the Final Act, which rightly led to the OSCE, whose guest I am today and that I am able to address today.

Was the then-American President Bush not right when he spoke of a new world order emerging? This was not the end of history. A new door had in fact been opened. Today, we realize that the period that followed has not been used for the creation and the shaping of this world order. It would have been up to the Europeans and all the signatories of the Helsinki Final Act to do this. After all, Europeans do have a message to give to the world — a message that can and must say: It is possible to learn from history. And it is also possible to identify common interests despite the many differences and then to try to take these common interests forward and translate them into co-operation, drawing closer to one another.

Today we are confronted with a fundamental decision: In a world that is becoming ever smaller and interdependent, where remote regions no longer exist, what kind of order can there be in such a world? Of course, one can simply let everything take its course. Things will work out one way or another. That is the chaos option, which ultimately ends in the law of the jungle. Or it is possible to envisage creating a world in which the Moscow-Washington bipolarity is replaced by a focus on one capital city, which eight years ago indeed appeared to be the doctrine in a large country with which we enjoy close relations.

And then the basic ideas that were realized here with the CSCE come to mind, the idea of working together for the common good on the basis of equal rights regardless of whether one is large or small. That is the

cooperation option, which, in my view, is the only possible, the only attractive and the only promising option for humanity. This is our task as Europeans. It is also the task of the signatory States from Vancouver to Vladivostok, including the great democracies of America, and the great expanse of Russia and the States that were once part of the Soviet Union.

For that reason, the task of the CSCE and the OSCE did not come to an end with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Rather, we owe it to other parts of the world to continue our work towards unifying Europe and shaping its future. This is the significance of the new developments that are finding new expression in the Corfu Process. Here, we see many topics that are familiar to us from those times. Of course we must create a mechanism that is capable of resolving conflicts by peaceful means. Of course we must continue arms control. Of course we must create confidence-building measures. This is necessary. We must recognize the new challenges that go far beyond the arms race and military threats: combating global terrorism, securing natural resources, the fight against organized crime.


A great author of our time in Germany once asked: You can tell when a war starts, but when does the pre-war period begin? One might add a second question to this question by Christa Wolf: Where does the pre-war period begin? It begins where prejudices poison how people think and act. Pre-war begins in the hearts of human beings, in their minds, where false feelings of superiority and false requirements for segregation lodge and could result in a dangerous development in the way we think and act. This is our task in educating young people, not waiting until they are in school, but beginning where the first imprints on their characters are made, namely in the family.

The substantive message of the CSCE and OSCE process is that much can be achieved collectively if we respect one another. Therefore, I sincerely hope that we use the opportunities that a new administration in the United States has opened up for us, as well as those presented by a new way of thinking in Russia, as reflected in the initiative announced by the Russian President in Berlin last year.

Several new challenges have been added since the fall of the Wall. And co-operation in this great Organization, in our OSCE, is a wonderful platform for discussing our common future in good grace and with respect for one another.

I hope, therefore, that the OSCE is aware of its responsibility to continue the processes that have been introduced and that extend far beyond the OSCE participating States. It is my wish, it is my hope, but it is also my plea to those who bear responsibility today: Just as we set out, back then, at a most difficult time to overcome the walls and borders in Europe, let us now work together so that the signatory States of the Helsinki Final Act — the participating States of the OSCE — can make their contribution, so that we can move closer together as a community sharing a common fate and giving the world a new face by way of our example.

This is my wish today. It is part of my country's gratitude towards all those who supported us during the time of our division. We — and the CSCE area certainly had something to do with this — have understood: Division is the worst thing, unification is not always easy, but desirable. We must strive to work towards that goal.



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