



Borders and Peace - The courage of the Pan-European Picnic to inspire a new European solidarity

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"On 19 August 1989, a prisoner nation opened the gates of its prison to help another prisoner nation step to freedom," reads a plaque in the Memorial Park in Sopron where the Pan European Picnic was held – standing proudly for a borderless and unified Europe.

Just back from Hungary, it is hard not to view the historic series of events, which led to the fall of the Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall through the lens of the present. Hungary has played an outstanding and courageous role in the dismantling of borders and barriers on our continent, allowing Europe to grow together, to further the European project of unity, peace and prosperity.

Sadly, barriers are still very much part of our realities, not just in Europe. At the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall, there were 15 border walls. Today, we count 70 walls in the world and seven more are under construction.

Geographical and psychological borders have a great impact on our European Union, its economy, social tissue and cultures.

In view of the urgency of this issue, at the core of our functioning as a Union, I decided to initiate a series of focus visits on "Peace and Borders" in Europe with the aim of driving the reconciliation of memory as a cornerstone of the European project.

My visit to Budapest and Sopron was the second step of this series of trips, which started in Belfast on 25 and 26 June 2019. Following Sopron will be Berlin for the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Wall and Nicosia on Cyprus, another divided island of Europe.

In Sopron in the summer of 1989, thousands of refugees from Eastern Europe, mainly from Eastern Germany, crossed the border to Austria. The Hungarian border guards did not block this wave of thousands of refugees. It was then clear that this political move in favour of freedom of movement across the Iron Curtain would usher in a new era of political freedom, which would break the authoritarian communist regimes.

In Budapest and Sopron, thanks to EESC Hungarian members invaluable help with organising the mission, have met and listened to many of the protagonists of these incredible days, who despite the risks and uncertainty, have shown courage and determination to dare the impossible. I am speechless and grateful in front of their grandiose action.

In particular, I am thinking of Reverend Imre Kozma, president of the Hungarian Maltese Caritas, who was instrumental in organising the reception of refugees from East Germany. One cannot but listen and respect in religious and grateful silence. Whoever risks his life to save a man saves the whole world and he has saved thousands, making history.

Thirty years earlier, over 180,000 Hungarians fled the repression of the 1956 revolution and found refuge in Austria, while another 20,000 fled to former Yugoslavia.

Visiting the Jewish community, I met Zoltán Radnóti, chief Rabbi of Budapest, and asked him whether they felt the brunt of growing nationalism in Hungary. His words felt like a warning: We do not fear here in Budapest as Jews, despite some antisemitism, mainly on social media. However, we know that whenever you start to differentiate between us and them, migrants and Hungarians, in the end, it will come back to the Jews. So we are wary of the developments."

I believe we must overcome borders, both political and geographical ones, but also borders of the mind, which restrict our freedom of thought and, ultimately, our actions. Barriers impede us from finding new solutions, discovering new perspectives and thus hinder growth and mutual understanding.

Now, more than ever, we need courage. We must stop the dangerous irrational logic of campaigns of fears against invading immigrants – so harmful for our democracies. We must embrace again the ambition that guided us 30 years ago to forge a real solidarity for the future. We want a responsible and supportive Europe, respectful of human rights.

It all starts with the reconciliation of memories. In his encyclical "Ut Unum Sint," St. John Paul II wrote that "the Church must breathe with her two lungs," referring to East and West. This idea was reflected in one of President Juncker's State of the Union speech, where he spoke of the Right and Left Lungs of Europe.

The Central and Eastern European countries have joined the single market and the Schengen zone. These are concrete landmarks of integration.

Thanks to what happened in Sopron, Germany, and then Europe were reunified. A historical result that has given the inspiration and the energy to overcome divisions, even on highly controversial questions, to dare common solutions, to protect men and women and promote together the European way of life.

Now, it's the time to talk freely about our history, our cultures and our expectations for the future of the European Union. Focusing just on a biased, simplistic black-and-white history does injustice to the richness and complex nature of European history and hampers a better understanding of the European integration process.

Europeans have lived different histories, but none is more relevant than the other. We should avoid becoming prisoners of our own history. It will be only through historical and cultural intelligence that we will be able to forge common solutions to common challenges. The strength of Europe lies in its cultural and historical diversity.

Time has come, as some history scholars have underlined, for a critical European culture of remembering rather than an imposed singular remembrance culture.

Yes, we can ... for sure. We shall show our gratitude to those who risked and dared 30 years ago.