



Gemeinschaft Evangelischer Kirchen in Europa (GEKE)
Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE)
Communion d'Eglises Protestantes en Europe (CEPE)

Being responsible for freedom Europe and the churches 20 years after the fall of the Iron Curtain

Declaration of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CEPE)

Freedom and unity in Europe

In 1989 Europe changed: the Iron Curtain fell, the forty-year-old Communist era came to an end. Freedom and democracy became possible for most countries of Europe. In Spring 1989 the Solidarity Movement in Poland was able to achieve power-sharing. In June the frontier between Hungary and Austria in Sopron was opened, first symbolically, then in reality. In August more than a million people joined together to form the Baltic Chain. In November 1989 the Wall fell in Germany. In Czechoslovakia the “Velvet Revolution” developed. At the end of 1989 in Romania the Ceausescu era came to an end with bloody riots.

Proclamation and the social responsibility of the churches

During the upheavals of 1989, in many countries the churches played an important role. Church members and community groups stood up with the courage of their faith for civil freedoms, the protection of the environment and the overcoming of the frontiers in Europe. Opposition forces were able to gather under church roofs. Prayers for peace and church worship became the forums of a resistance which toppled the Communist systems because they were prepared for everything but candles and prayers.

In the past 20 years the churches in Central and Eastern Europe have increasingly taken over responsibility for society. New diaconal organizations have been founded or old ones rebuilt. The churches with their ethical and social competence are

entering controversies in society and have learned again how to combine public proclamation and social responsibility. The falling away of frontiers is making possible a new dynamic in which the churches live and work together in the ecumene.

Overcoming the frontiers and new break lines

For people in Central and Eastern Europe the revolution in 1989 was bound up with many expectations: hopes for the overcoming of the frontiers between East and West, for civil rights and democracy, for a better economic future in the market economy. Between 2004 and 2007 most Central and Eastern European countries were able to join the European Union. However, not all the promises of the new freedom in Europe have been fulfilled. In the past twenty years the process of European Union has not only failed to abolish frontiers, but has also made new break lines visible.

A stocktaking of the past 20 years in Central and Eastern European countries has many dimensions. On the one hand are gratitude and joy at liberation from systematic and violent oppression and the positive experiences in growing together into a united Europe. On the other side anxiety is growing about the great economic and social differences in Europe and a persistent mental division into "East" and "West". In some post-Communist countries the totalitarian past has not been worked through and assimilated sufficiently. The old elites have in part asserted their position of power. That makes it difficult for people to involve themselves in the new democratic forms. Europe "without frontiers" offers great freedom and opportunities, but it is also experienced as a loss of familiar areas of life, as alienation, as a crisis of values. A new re-nationalization is putting ethnic and religious minorities under pressure and burdening the coexistence of people in Europe.

Memory and promise

With the events of 1989 a twofold task has fallen on the churches of Europe: to work through their own entanglement in the history of oppression and to face the tasks of the future. In respect of the past the churches from Southern and Eastern Europe in the CPCE have stated: *"The past is... not simply extinguished but has engraved itself on the collective memory as something remembered which keeps returning... as the urgent question of justice, a longing for a better world and pain about abiding losses."*

The experiences of resistance are an encouragement to stand up for freedom and justice and to create new free areas in Europe. The memory of the 1989 liberation is also a memory of a God who overcomes boundaries and time and again gives new freedom: "I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt, and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt..."(Ex.3.16-17). The experiences help to strengthen the formative power of Christian faith throughout Europe.

Responsible freedom

The present economic crisis presents Europe with tremendous challenges which more urgently than ever call for togetherness in Europe as a presupposition for peace – also for social peace. Their memory obligated the Protestant churches in Europe to use freedom to strengthen the community over and above all frontiers. Memories of stories of grief and pain, and of living and successful resistance, political blindness and self-satisfaction along with moments of the courageous action of individuals strengthen faith and encourage the churches to work for a *"humane, socially conscious Europe, in which human rights and the basic values of peace, justice, freedom, tolerance, participation and solidarity prevail "* (Charta Oecumenica). The remembrance of 1989 is an obligation to keep preserving freedom anew time and again, and to take responsibility for it. The CPCE will play its part.

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The Presidium of the CPCE

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