



Páneurópai Piknik  
Sopron 2009

Speech by President **László Sólyom**,  
at the Gala Concert Marking the 20th Anniversary of the Pan-European Picnic

Dear Chancellor, Ladies and Gentlemen!

It is unusual for me to have the opportunity to speak to the same audience on the same occasion for the second time in just a few hours. Still, I feel there is a major difference. This afternoon we gathered at the scene where the events took place. We returned to the site of the breakthrough, the place where six hundred East German citizens underwent the unbelievable experience, the shock, of winning their freedom. The Pan-European Picnic of August 19, 1989 was not an artificial media event, organized by the government, like the cutting of the last section of the Iron Curtain on June 27. Instead, it was an unpredictable twist of history. It was a living event, a flesh and blood event. The only reason no blood was shed was because the commander of the Hungarian border guards had the common sense and his heart in the right place. Our meeting at the site of the event was also a meeting with our past selves, and unveiling the memorial affected us all deeply.

This concert, in just a few hours, will be a gala, an expression of respect to the past. Presentation of a work of music composed specifically for the occasion, the performance of a German choir, and finally, the music of the 9th Symphony, the symbol of European identity and universality, is a worthy and fitting program. However, it is no longer the time for pure passion and emotions, but for a cooler historical verdict, for an objective review and evaluation. It did not even have to be held here. Nevertheless, it is good that it is here, near the former breakthrough, and that it was organized by the same civic bodies. This proud celebration delivers justice to the civil organizations. The Hungarian and international media have been pointing out that the people of the country, played the decisive role in the regime change. The regime change was not the result of an agreement between the politicians of the old regime and the developing democratic opposition, a decision taken over the heads of the people. It was even less the response of the reform Communists to the collapse of their system. I have never met so many wonderful and brave people as I did in 1988 and 1989. These people organized, set up organizations, voiced their ideas for a future Hungary and Europe, and organized events, such as the Pan-European Picnic, which may have appeared naïve, but were symbolic at that time.

In praising the civilians, the last thing I want to do is reduce the merits of Miklós Németh and his government in dismantling the locks on the border and particularly in allowing the East German citizens to leave. The only power which was capable to do this was the government, which controlled foreign affairs as well as the armed forces. Doing it was a great moral and political accomplishment.

But, on today's anniversary, we need to see all participants in the regime change together. Therefore, we must respectfully recall the huge physical, emotional, and political assistance given by the Hungarian Maltese Charity to the East German citizens. Neither the dismantling of the Iron Curtain, nor the border breakthrough 20 years ago, nor even the act of allowing the East Germans to leave was enough, to end the division of Europe. Although the barbed wire was down, two radically different political systems were left on the opposite sides of the border, which was no longer civilized. These differences had to be eliminated in order for Europe to unite. This process was already advanced in Hungary towards the end of August, 1989. The Roundtable Negotiations were close to completion of reaching a consensus on multiparty democracy, the rule of law, and free elections to be held soon.

The events in 1989 progressed in parallel. Though unplanned, they touched on and reinforced one another. That summer, citizens of East Germany were not the only ones to seek refuge in Hungary. The nearly two million ethnic Hungarians living in Romania were being subjected to unbearable pressure as a minority, and the number who sought refuge in Hungary surged to torrential proportions. It would have been inconceivable to force those Hungarians to go back to Romania.

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Therefore, Hungary joined the Geneva Convention on refugees, an action that also benefitted the East Germans. The organizers of the Picnic in Sopron had not expected the East German citizens to appear there and break through the gate, but they were thrilled when they did. They did not know what Miklós Németh was planning to do, or how much Moscow' failure to react to the Picnic would accelerate agreement between Hungary and West Germany. When Chancellor Kohl announced the agreement, was it certain that Germany would be reunited? Perhaps he realized that the first brick had fallen out of the Berlin Wall, and the wall would come down.

Looking at events from today, the chain of causation is clear, and so is Hungary's role. We are therefore proud to remember the events, and to offer participants the homage they deserve.

It is impossible to decide whether it was an accident, that the road to German unity lay through Hungary. As for me, I feel a great deal of satisfaction. Although politics and the economy have their own unbreakable laws, feelings of affinity between the two peoples have managed to bend these laws. For decades, Lake Balaton was the place where West Germans and East Germans were able to meet regularly and freely. Hundreds of Hungarian doctors, engineers and lawyers attended West German universities and worked in their institutions on long-term scholarships and fellowships in the 1980s. Aside from the vigorous economic relations, these factors suggest a relationship and the event fit in it. These intellectual ties have proven to be extraordinarily fruitful since the regime change.

Dear Madame Chancellor, and Distinguished Guests!

Twenty years ago the organizers of the Picnic and the entire country were burning with the desire to return to Europe. The few brief hours of normal human contact with the residents of the neighboring Austrian settlements, the joint picnic, was a utopian, almost surreal, event in which people acted as though the demarcation line cutting Europe in two since the end of the Second World War no longer existed. Since democracy in Hungary came into being, we joined the European Union and became part of the Schengen border region, the barbed wire and border controls are only an unpleasant memory. Today's celebration is in part an expression of our joy about this. Still, we must continue our efforts to prevent other types of barriers to freedoms from being built within the European Union. The European Union is no longer the Coal and Steel Community. It has become a community of values expressing the liberties of the EU citizens. The EU must not look the other way if people in one of its members are restricted in the use of their native language and even punished for speaking it. The European Union is composed of many diverse communities. Its calling is to serve as the union of all communities of European citizens and not just of member states; to be the union of regional and of ethnic and cultural communities; we would call this a "cultural nation".

