

Report from the International Spring Forum



INTERNATIONAL SPRING FORUM
16TH - 18TH JUNE 2021 ONLINE OPEN DISCUSSIONS:

- 1. LIVING IN THE DIVIDED EUROPE BEFORE 1989** (16TH JUNE, 4 PM)
- 2. DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTIONS 1989** (16TH JUNE, 6 PM)
- 3. LIVING IN TRANSITION** (17TH JUNE, 4 PM)
- 4. LEGACY OF DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTIONS 1989** (17TH JUNE, 6 PM)
- 5. FUTURE OF EUROPE** (18TH JUNE, 4 PM)

Reshaping the Image of
Democratic Revolutions 1989:
European contemporary Perspectives
and forgotten Lessons from the Past

The International Spring Forum organized as a series of five online discussions dedicated to the democratic revolutions of 1989 and their legacy is one of the activities in the frame of the project “Reshaping the Image of Democratic Revolutions 1989: European contemporary Perspectives and forgotten Lessons from the Past” coordinated by Documenta – Centre for Dealing with the Past. The project is implemented in the cooperation with following European organizations and institutions: BLOCKFREI – Verein für Kultur und Kommunikation (Austria), Aarhus University (Denmark), University of Tartu (Estonia), United Societies of Balkans (Greece), HIPMONT – Association of History Teachers of Montenegro (Montenegro), European Network Remembrance and Solidarity (Poland) and CRDL (Romania).



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Co-funded by the
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Panel discussion 1 "Living in divided Europe before 1989"

The International Spring Forum was opened on Wednesday (June 16th) with a panel discussion by the name "Life in divided Europe before 1989". The gathered participants were firstly addressed by dr. Boris Stamenić, coordinator of the program area "Culture of Memory" in Documenta and organizer of the International Spring Forum, expressing satisfaction with the start of the Forum, briefly presenting the project and its activities. Speaking about the democratic revolutions of 1989, Stamenić pointed out the existence of significant differences between different countries of Central and Eastern Europe in the second half of the 1980s and the impact of these differences on the later course of the democratic changes. The introductory address concluded with the hope that the material collected during the Forum would provide a good basis for a short film on the democratic revolutions of 1989, as one of the project's anticipated results.

After the introduction, the participants discussed their own experiences regarding traveling and the possibilities of international mobility for the citizens of their countries during the 1980s. An attempt was made to outline the common European experience of living in a divided Europe before 1989, including the similarities and differences of life in the Western and the Eastern bloc.

Helga Neumayer from Austria was the first to address the participants, sharing her experience of growing up in a small town in Austria during the 1960s and 1970s. She said she grew up in a working-class family that had strong sympathies for communism, and that she and her parents visited several countries ruled by communist parties at the time, including Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Yugoslavia. Ms. Neumayer particularly highlighted the trip to Hungary where she noticed that people live in a very similar way to her family in Austria.

Vojsava Kumbulla, a history teacher from Albania, also addressed the gathering. Ms. Kumbulla was born in 1975 near the border with Greece, and she witnessed the fall of communism as a sixteen-year-old. She said that in the 80s, schools taught mainly about communism and dictators. Her brother tried to leave Albania which caused great fears in the family who did not know what would happen to him but also what would happen to them. Leaving the country was considered

a hostile act, and the then communist regime tried to close the borders and prevent the uncontrolled mobility of citizens, carefully monitoring their movements.

Sorbin Focșanianu from Romania followed up on Cumbula's presentation, talking about the contemporary process of dealing with the past in Romania. Mr Focșanianu emphasized that young people are no longer interested in topics related to the communist era. He pointed out that in the 1990s and early 2000s there was a public debate about that period and the democratic revolution, but that in the last ten years there has been far less public interest in these topics. He warned of the importance of motivating young people for such topics, along with the specifics related to Romania, which had both fascist and communist terror, the consequences of which are still being felt today.

The first panel of the International Spring Forum was concluded with a conversation between Boris Stamenić and Vesna Teršelič, the director of Documenta. Ms. Teršelič grew up in socialist Yugoslavia, which is often described as a "country between East and West", and the conversation with her provided insight into travel opportunities for the country's citizens. Ms. Teršelič mentioned the liberalization of the crossing of the borders for workers ("gasterbeiters") in the mid-1960s when also the possibility of tourist visits abroad was liberalized. Ms. Teršelič said that she visited most of the republics of the former Yugoslavia traveling by train or hitchhiking. In the second half of the 1980s, she established a cooperation with environmental and social activists in Vienna, Budapest and Prague, and through socializing with them she followed the turbulent social and political changes in Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s.



Panel discussion 2 "Democratic Revolutions 1989"

The second panel discussion by the name "Democratic Revolutions 1989" was dedicated to the events in Romania, a country where the changes in the late 1980s were particularly dramatic. Dr. Gruia Badescu, Domnica Macri, and Sorin Ghimici recalled the events in Bucharest in late 1989 and introduced the participants to the lesser-known drama of crushing student protests in the spring of 1990. Dr. Gruia Badescu, a researcher at the University of Konstanz, briefly presented the similarities and differences between the democratic revolutions that took place in six countries of Central and Eastern Europe in 1989. Badescu pointed out that democratic changes in some countries passed without violence, while the overthrow of the Ceaușescu regime in Romania was marked by violent responses of the ruling structures towards the protesters.

Domnica Macri, a witness, and participant in the 1989 protests in Romania shared her experiences with the participants of the Forum. In her remarks, Ms. Macri explained that she was a teenager in the 1980s and was furious at the regime, the injustice, and the general situation in the country. She particularly emphasized the period during the 1980s as a traumatic one because people lived with food shortages when certain necessities such as meat, cheese, and milk were unavailable for a long time.

Another panelist, Sorin Ghimici, was a direct participant in the rallies and protests on Bucharest's main square that triggered the change of the regime. Ghimici was 36 at the end of 1989 and described the beginning of the protest from his own perspective, emphasizing that the young and most rebellious participants in the demonstrations were located in the middle, while a circle of older people spread around them. He especially remembered the young people who went to houses, factories, institutions and invited people to join them with the slogan "Let's defend the revolution!"

The session concluded with a talk about the importance of freedom of speech, which today seems self-evident to many, and not so long ago was a dream and a luxury.



Panel discussion 3 "Living in Transition"

The third panel "Living in Transition", offered two very different perspectives. On the one hand, prof. Peeter Torop from the University of Tartu presented to the participants the transition in Estonia in the context of comparative studies of the political mentality and pointed out the significant change in the last two decades. According to the theory of culture shock, applied to the events and context of 1989 in Estonia, in the late 1980s, there was a phase of enthusiasm which in the first half of the 1990s was replaced by a phase of disorientation due to the new situation, the new ideology and its implications for society.

On the other hand, Dr. Lana Mayer from the University of Osijek presented herself through a very personal story about growing up as a refugee in Germany, returning to Croatia, and re-examining her identity due to two forced departures from the environment in which she grew up. After the outbreak of the war in Croatia in 1991, Lana Mayer moved with her family to Germany where she lived for 6 years. She pointed out that the war in the first half of the 1990s was an important turning point for many people in Croatia, and that many people in Croatia are still dividing their lives into periods before and after the war. Ms. Mayer noted that as a child she had a positive refugee experience, but due to the then migration policy of the German authorities, Mayer had to return to Vukovar with her family after the war. Upon her return, she experienced another "culture shock. ' In the end, Mayer decided to stay and re-learn the Croatian language and she eventually became a professor who teaches young people about the topics of transition, forced migration, integration, diversity, and multiculturalism.

The presentations triggered a discussion in which the participants presented their views on the question of whether the transition process is already over.



Panel discussion 4 "Legacy of Democratic Revolutions 1989"

The fourth session, "The Legacy of Democratic Revolutions", gave the floor to speakers from Poland, Germany and Hungary. Yolanta Grygorczyk, Elżbieta Moczarska, Dr. Burkhard Olschowsky and Dr. Gabor Danyi in conversation with Dr. Annemarie Franke from the European Network of Remembrance and Solidarity Institute (ENRS) recalled where they were in the autumn of 1989.

Yolanta Grygorczyk was born in London. During the 1980s, she went to Poland with a research scholarship and later got a job at the University of Warsaw. Ms. Grygorczyk recalled how in the late 1980s she and her husband considered moving to London. But the impending change that was already being felt forced them to stay in Poland. Consequently, she welcomed the democratic changes and the formation of the first multi-party government in 1989 in Warsaw.

Elżbieta Moczarska studied Polish literature at the University of Warsaw. Democratic changes in 1989 found her in London as well, where she had moved four years earlier. After the democratic revolution, she decided to return to Poland. She considers herself an actor in the transformation of Polish society. In 2014, she founded the 'Kazimierz and Zofia Moczarscy Foundation', named after her parents, with the aim of supporting initiatives and organizations that promote the historical and social education of young people and adults. She emphasizes that such things would not have been possible without the democratic changes of 1989, which enabled freedom of speech, assembly, and public action.

Burkhard Olschowsky, a research associate at the Federal Institute for Culture and History of the Germans in Eastern Europe (BKGE), also shared his memories of the 1989 democratic revolution. Mr. Olschowsky was born in East Berlin in 1969. In November 1988, he received a call-up for military service in the East German army, which he said he desperately wanted to avoid. He recalled how news of the unrest in East Germany in the fall of 1989 caused a state of emergency in the army barracks where he was. Mr. Olschowsky said his commander had ordered special

preparations "for defense against imperialist occupation of the country". He and other conscripts feared that they would be ordered to break up mass street demonstrations, which did not happen. He found out about the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9 only a day later, when he found himself on leave from the barracks. As soon as he learned that the border in Berlin was open, he went to visit a friend in West Berlin.

The last speaker was Gábor Danyi, a researcher in the field of comparative literature with a focus on opposition publications created in Hungary during the Cold War. During the democratic revolutions in 1989, Gábor was five years old and lived with his family in Budapest. He recalled how he and a girl from the neighborhood rejoiced when they heard that a coup had taken place in Romania and that Ceausescu was dead because they had learned from adult conversations that he was a bad man.

After the presentations, the floor was opened for comments and presentations by other participants and discussion among the panelists. The opinion prevailed that contemporary dealing with the recent past in most of the European post-communist societies is predominantly focused on the communist period, while the democratic revolutions and post-communist transition represent rather marginal issues.



Panel discussion 5 "Future of Europe"

Friday, June 18th, was the last day of the International Spring Forum. The final panel, "The Future of Europe", offered an opportunity to summarize the impressions from previous sessions and to discuss the current and future challenges for Europe. At the beginning of the final session, Jana Dolečki addressed the audience on behalf of the partner organization BLOCKFREI - Verein für Kultur und Kommunikation from Austria. Ms. Dolečki commented on important questions about the consequences of the democratic revolutions of 1989 on our lives today, with a graphic presentation of research statistics on the disbalance between the expectations and standard of living of certain countries of the former Eastern bloc after 1991.

Participant Besnik Emini from Northern Macedonia also addressed the audience, sharing his own experience in 1989. During that period, Mr. Emini finished elementary school and enrolled in high school. According to his memory, those years were very challenging because Northern Macedonia was then part of Yugoslavia and, unlike the practice in the rest of Europe where borders were opening, around him, borders were closing. Katarina Damčević, born in 1988 in Croatia, also shared her experience, emphasizing that her parents remember those years as a period of crisis and depression. She also shared a recent experience of talking to some younger people from Latvia who, to her surprise, had rather negative opinion about democratic revolutions 1989, thereby expressing positive attitude towards the Soviet Union. Nevena Janković, born 1981 in Serbia, recounted the experience of her mother, who felt insecure and scared due to the unpredictability of the direction of change in the late 1980s.

In the second part of the closing panel, the focus switched to the current challenges. As highlighted during the discussion, contemporary challenges such as mass migration and social change caused by rapid technological development in many EU member states contribute to raising doubts about the European Union's ability to find adequate answers. But despite all the challenges, the participants expressed confidence that Europe has the potential for further progress and expressed a dose of moderate optimism about its future.



The International Spring forum was the second activity in the frame of the project “Reshaping the Image of Democratic Revolutions 1989: European contemporary Perspectives and forgotten Lessons from the Past”, co-funded by the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union. The project seeks to remind European citizens about the democratic revolutions 1989-1990 as a period of arduous struggles for pluralistic democracy and peaceful coexistence in Europe with the aim to strengthen the contemporary commitment of the European citizens to the preservation of democratic pluralism and democratic institutions. While fostering the transnational dialogue of European citizens about 1989 and its consequences, the project increases awareness among the citizens about the similarities of European countries and thereby contributes to the strengthening of European identity. For more information about the project, please follow this [link](#).

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