



30 YEARS IN FREEDOM

Anyone who witnessed the fall of communism will never forget the feeling of limitless joy and happiness that used to fill their hearts during those days. In Budapest, Prague, Warsaw or Leipzig, Dresden, Berlin and Bucharest for that matter, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in protest against the hopeless and grey decades imposed on them by Soviet occupation and demanding freedom and independence. The first moments when we were breathing freely became especially precious memories for all of us.

The year 1989 almost immediately became known as an *Annus Mirabilis* because everything happened fast enough to seem miraculous. In Hungary, the demolition of the Iron Curtain consisting of barbed wire, signalisation systems and watchtowers started in the spring, then on June 16, hundreds of thousands gathered in Heroes' Square to bury the heroes of the 1956 revolution and war of independence. In a matter of a few weeks after then 25-year-old Viktor Orbán demanded free elections and the immediate withdrawal of occupying Soviet troops on Heroes' Square, tens of thousands of East German citizens swarmed into Hungary to flee to the free world through Austria. And we opened the border for them. Those who remained at home, pulled down the Berlin wall, the murderous symbol of the division of Germany, Europe and the world in anger on November 9, 1989. Finally, Nicolae Ceaușescu, one of the most infamous figures of the history of communist dictatorships was toppled by revolting millions of Romanians before being condemned to death in December.

What happened in 1989 was the culmination of the struggle for freedom fought for almost half a century by the peoples of Eastern Europe who had been forced to live within the sphere of interest of the Soviet Union. The photos of demonstrations, marches, people breaking through the borders or embracing and dancing in front of what remained of the Berlin wall were published on the front pages of important newspapers and magazines throughout the world and those events were often broadcast live on TV. Anyone looking at those photos or TV footages will be convinced that the communist regimes did not crumble by themselves but were overthrown by the millions of citizens aspiring for freedom. By that time, the leaders of the party-states had lost their assurance, but it was the courage and

determination of those masses that forced them to back down. 30 years after 1989, we must finally declare that the fall of communism, the retreat of the Soviet Union, the fall of the Berlin wall dividing Europe and as a result the reunification of Europe were imposed by the desire of freedom, the democratic commitment and the perseverance of the peoples of Eastern Europe. The peoples that had suffered half a century of communism had in fact never given up their dreams to return one day to their national traditions; live in democracy, following their own laws and customs. We were aspiring to the kind of life the citizens of Western Europe were living; to return to the family of the free peoples of Europe from which we were excluded in the wake of World War II as a result of the decision of the great powers. We spent almost half a century locked behind the Iron Curtain, at the mercy of those who were testing their communist utopia at our expense.

30 years ago, we had three interconnected goals in mind. We were aspiring to the kind of life and living standards enjoyed by West Europeans; we wanted to be integrated in the European Union and intended to join NATO. The latter two were fulfilled. Reaching European living standards is still way ahead.

And still, we are proud of what we have achieved over the past three decades. Our democratic institutions are viable; we enjoy the freedom of expression, of the press and of assembly. By now it is not Coke alone which is protected by the law as in those times when foreign giant companies were the only ones who could feel safe in our countries. 30 years after, we can proudly look around us. We still have a lot to do to catch up with others but from patent followers, we have become pattern creators in many respects. After such a long time, Hungary is back on the map. It has become a point of reference. That is a high responsibility we must cope with.

