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Commemorating the Victims of Totalitarian Regimes in European Public Space

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Thank you for the invitation. Today on 23rd August, we celebrate the European Day of Remembrance. This day of commemoration was established on the anniversary of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact. This pact, preceding the Second World War, was proof of the criminal cooperation of two oppressive systems that brought death to millions in Europe.

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Let me begin by recalling another event in the history of Poland that illustrates the cooperation of two totalitarian systems, even though at that time the Third Reich and the USSR were already at war with each other.

On 1st August, in Poland, we remembered the 80th anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising.

Poland suffered greatly during the war. The Nazi Germany occupation authorities set up the concentration and extermination camps, in which Jews from all over Europe, Poles, and the representatives of many other nations, died. The Polish elite was murdered by the second occupier - the Soviet Union. Between 1939 and 1945, about 6 million Polish citizens perished (including 3 million Polish Jews, more than 2 million Poles, and many Polish citizens of other ethnicities).

The Warsaw Uprising was a reaction to the cruelty of the occupation, but also a hope for the liberation of the capital with our own forces. It failed because Stalin, theoretically already an ally, refused to help the uprising even though his troops were stationed very close, just on the other side of the Vistula River. Stalin also forbade the British aid planes from landing in the territory controlled by the Red Army.

The Warsaw Uprising Museum, one of the most frequently visited museums in Poland, plays a pivotal role in the commemorations. In Warsaw and many other cities, there are numerous plaques, monuments, street names, etc. referring to the history of the uprising. All over the country, on 1st August, at 5 pm, the air raid alarms sound, and people stop for a moment of silence to honour the victims. The Warsaw Uprising is very important in the collective identity of the Poles.

But is this history widely known in Paris, Madrid, or Berlin?

Probably not. Because **there is no single unified European collective memory.**

There are memories of different nations and communities. It is hard to imagine that all Europeans from Lisbon to Kiev and Vilnius would share the same recollection canon. However, we are not that different. **All Europeans have things in common and the perception of the past can unite us.**

The European community needs a shared historical memory because every community needs a collective remembrance. That is why we are tasked to discover these things we have in common and present them to the European public.

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If we search for what unites the Europeans in their perception of the past, we must look at the experience of 20th-century totalitarianism.

The memory of the victims of totalitarianism can be seen as one of the key elements of the collective European remembrance. Why? Because:

- most of Europe was affected by totalitarianism – so this is a shared experience,
- the victims show the shared European values such as human dignity, civil courage, freedom, and democracy
- the victims deserve to be remembered,
- focusing on the victims will allow us to understand each other better - the fate of the victim can unite us in empathy, unlike an ‘ordinary political history’, which is subject to various disputes and interpretations,
- we need this memory to strengthen our societies' sensitivity to basic human rights, resistance to anti-democratic tendencies, and resilience to external threats. ‘Never again’ must be preceded by ‘never forget’.

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The collective remembrance needs both consensus and commemoration in the European public space. We see many events reminding us of the victims of totalitarianism in Europe. However, these are mostly an expression of the remembrance of individual nations and communities.

There is still a lack of remembrance on the European level, in ‘the European public space’.

What do I mean by ‘the European public space’? I mean remembrance sites that are created, shared, and recognized by all Europeans, not just by nations or communities. It can be a monument, a memorial, a pan-European celebration, a museum, or any other official acknowledgement of European remembrance and commemoration of the past.

Creating a pan-European remembrance of the victims in European public space still presents a challenge. It is so for several reasons:

- at the European level, in European policy, the importance of history and memory in shaping a community is not a priority yet,
- at the state level, the decision-makers are focused on national and local commemorations, and in some cases, historical memory is an object of competition between governments,
- the Central and Eastern European nations are often misunderstood by their Western colleagues when it comes to their experience of communist totalitarianism. In some circles, there is a denial that communism was a source of the totalitarian system.

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But there are also achievements. Attempts to establish proper commemorations at the European level are mainly undertaken in the European Parliament. It is not only the European Union but also the Council of Europe. They are also supported by pan-European NGOs such as the Platform of European Memory and Conscience (PEMC). Examples:

- in 2006, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, passed the Resolution No. 1481(2006) on the need for international condemnation of the crimes of totalitarian communist regimes,
- in 2008, the European Parliament issued a statement on the European Day of Victims of Stalinism and Nazism,
- in 2009, the European Parliament voted for the Resolution on European conscience and totalitarianism. In this resolution The European Parliament has been calling for the establishment of the Platform of European Memory and Conscience to provide networking and cooperation support for the national research institutes specialising in totalitarian history, and for creating a pan-European documentation centre and memorial for the victims of all totalitarian regimes.
- in 2019, the European Parliament passed the Resolution on the importance of the European remembrance for the future of Europe
- and in 2024, the Resolution on European historical consciousness

Initiatives stemming from these documents are:

- the Holocaust Remembrance Day,
- the European Day of Remembrance for Victims of all Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes,
- the Platform of European Memory and Conscience (PEMC) is an European educational project bringing together institutions (both public and NGOs) active in research, documentation, awareness raising, and education about the crimes of totalitarian,

- European Network Remembrance and Solidarity (ENRS), created with the purpose of to document and promote the study of European 20th-century history with a focus on dictatorial regimes, wars, and resistance to oppression.

- the House of European History opened its doors in 2017 and presents the history of 20th century but it may feel like a lost chance from the victim remembrance point of view.

There is still a need for a complement in the form of an institution in the heart of the EU that will deal with commemorating the victims of totalitarianism in the European space. Such a project is the Pan-European Memorial and Documentary Center.

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The actions regarding the Pan-European Memorial for Victims and Documentation Center:

- the abovementioned resolution from 2009,

- in 2017, an open competition for the project, under the auspices of the President of the European Parliament, with Foster and Co. as the jury and Tszwai So, a London-based architect as the winner,

- in 2022, the start of the implementation, public consultation, presentation, documentation, and evaluation of the site.

The idea of the monument is based on the concept of a messenger who brings victims' letters from the past and scatters them at our feet. With the help of an international team of experts and through dialogue, we will select approximately 800 original letters written by the victims for the last time. Many of them were written from the Gulag, concentration camps, labour camps, and prisons. A relatively large number of letters will allow a balanced representation of various backgrounds such as gender, age, religion, nationality, experiences, etc., and many contexts in which they were found.

These letters will then be mapped and printed on concrete paving and placed on the memorial-designated square.

Each letter will be reproduced as it appeared in the manuscript. However, using a QR code or other medium, the audience will be able to read the transcription on the smartphone in the language of their choice, learn more about the person, and find out more about the historical events.

In this way, it will be possible to shift attention from the symbolic memorial to knowledge and facts.

We currently have about five potential locations in Brussels, which we will evaluate together with the local administration in the coming months. Accessibility for people with special needs will be key during the process.

I also would like to mention another aspect of the project. The Memorial will be a starting point for the construction of the Documentation Centre. We assume that it will be in a digital form. It will include a knowledge base containing archival and educational resources from institutions from all over Europe. It will also be an access point to educational programs. And a lot more.

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A public reconciliation with the past and a feeling of justice being delivered is a basis for the shared memory.

The perpetrators of the crimes must face the courts. If they are dead, then at least they should be tried symbolically.

The justice system in the transitional period has largely failed to meet expectations. It is especially prominent regarding the perpetrators of the communist crimes as only a small number of them have been brought to justice.

We have an example of a great failure to conduct a proper international assessment of communism, happening as we speak. It is the war Russia is waging against Ukraine. This totalitarian way of viewing the world is the root of the conflict.

Since communism was not properly judged and the victims were not properly remembered in the public space internationally, it was relatively easy for the public opinion of the democratic countries to accept the possibility of cooperation with a state headed by an officer of the former KGB, the political police responsible for the persecution and death of many people.

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So, it seems that we are still at the beginning of the process of creating appropriate remembrance of the totalitarianism victims in the European public space.

There are achievements of the European Parliament, there are achievements of civic organisations, and celebrations such as today on 23rd August.

It is still not enough though, and commemorating particularly the victims of communism on the European level seems to be a big challenge.

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Let me emphasize once again that remembering the victims of 20th-century totalitarianism is difficult but it is also what we as Europeans have in common, and therefore has the power to build our community.

I believe that the Pan-European Memorial construction can be a starting point for a fundamental, positive change, and inspire further initiatives. At the same time, we need to appreciate various local and national commemorations, which prove that this memory exists, but still requires more to make it universal at the European level.

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Thank you for making remembrance important in Germany. Thank you for being here today.

I believe that we are members of the community of remembrance, and the day of 23rd August unites the Europeans.

Dr. Marek Mutor