

Grußwort von Herrn Piening anlässlich der Verleihung des Preises „Bridging Divisions in Cities“ an die Stadt Berlin im Rahmen der 49. Union of Capitals of the European Union (UCEU) Conference – General Assembly vom 29. – 31.10.2009 in Nikosia

Dear Mayor Mavrou (Eleni Mavrou, Mayor of Nicosia),
Dear Mr. Stefanou (Cyprus Government Spokesman),
Dear Mr. Garoyian (President of the House of Representatives)

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you very much for the invitation to the 49th Assembly of the UCEU. It is indeed a special honour for me to accept the award “Bridging Divisions in Cities” on behalf of the City of Berlin and its Governing Mayor. Mr. Wowereit regrets not being able to receive the price personally and sends his thankful regards to all of you.

As you all know the Berlin wall fell the 9th November 1989. But the declining of the GDR wasn't just an event happening on one day or night. A long and patient political process preceded. Narrow paths between Easten and Western Germany, built in the 70s by Willy Brandt, former Chancellor and Peace-Nobelprize holder broadened to wide avenues, where people of East and West could express their hope for freedom. At last the government of the GDR couldn't ignore the call of its citizens for freedom and democracy.

But the sudden opening of the wall was as much a surprise for the world as for the Berliners. Its proclamation on a press conference the evening of 9 November was rather unglamorous and incidental. In a way typical for Berlin; or better: typical for the New Berlin, which likes the understatement, the incidental, the improvisation and the spontaneity.

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Many Berliners have undertaken tremendous efforts in the days of the peaceful German revolution in 1989. The belief in a better world is, as we all know, able to move mountains. This belief gave Berliners the energy and the optimism to tackle the challenges coming with unification. The wall had cut the lifeline of the city. The challenges for Urban planning, Infrastructure, Social and Economic policies were without parallel. Hundred thousand of jobs disappeared. Also the people in East and West had to learn dealing with one another in day-to-day life.

20 years have gone since these days of emotion, but the Fall of the Berlin Wall is more than ever a symbol: The former symbol of the Cold War and the worlds' division into two ideological systems has changed into a symbol of the power of people's desire for freedom, justice and peace.

I have to admit, I feel especially honoured receiving today's award but - as a Berlin Citizen - maybe also a little surprised. Not that we think we do not deserve it, but, along with our affinity to understatement, we feel that the unity of our city has become a normality in our day-to-day life. The film shown in a minute will make it quite clear: differences between the Eastern and the Western part of the city are difficult to discover. The scars of division have been mostly healed in the past 20 years.

Of course this has in first instance to do with the people living in Berlin. Berlin is a vibrant place with a liberal mind. This is the tradition which made the city to a cultural magnet in the 1920s. Today's Berlin has, after the trauma of National Socialism and division, returned to this tradition of liberalism. "Live and let live" is the mentality dominant in Berlin's population. It is this mental freedom that triggers the creativity of our city. But it is also this mentality that gives Berlin the strength to deal with the pressing social problems in the city. "Berlin is poor but sexy" this phrased coined by our Governing Mayor Klaus Wowereit grasps the self-understanding and the atmosphere of Berlin in a nutshell.

In effect, 20 years after the wall came down we aren't too much occupied with the differences between East and West because they are no longer dominant. What we see

are differences in life-styles, cultural traditions, diverging religious beliefs and languages. The Berlin of the 21st century is a united but diverse place. And let me state this very clear: We see these differences as a huge plus to our city. They give Berlin its vibrant charms; they trigger innovation and creative solutions. And they are the bases for a sense of liberalism and laissez-faire attitude Berlin's population is very fond of.

However, some of these differences are based in real social divisions. Berlin sees a lot of poverty and an increasing gap between richer and poorer parts of the city. This is one of the main challenges we face today: If we talk about "Bridging divisions" in cities, the foremost challenge is to strengthen the social cohesion in our city, to strengthen equal opportunities in the educational sector and on the labour market. But at the same time we need to foster the cultural and religious diversity. These are two sides of one coin and both are fundamental for social peace and innovation. I suppose this is true for most large cities in Europe.

And presumably to tear down the wall between rich and poor is a challenge much bigger than to tear down the Berlin Wall.

And we have to watch very carefully not to support the establishing of new walls between Western countries and the Islamic world which would obstruct our common future. Therefore I'm glad and I assume it as an important message, that the mayors of the Arab countries are invited to this UCUE-conference too.

Allow me one last word with regard to the special place we gather here. As a representative from a city which has been divided for more than 25 years I find it especially moving to receive this award in a city which still is politically divided. I strongly hope that the unity of Berlin will give an encouraging signal for the process of unification in Nikosia.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Unity in diversity is an aim cities in Europe should strive for. To be successful on this journey the ability to bridge divisions is an essential condition.

Let's all work on our skills as bridge builders.

Thank you very much!