
MERKEL MEETS ORBAN ON IRON CURTAIN ANNIVERSARY AMID NEW DIVIDES

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German Chancellor Angela Merkel recalled the importance of a humane Europe Monday (19 August) as she took part in commemorations in Hungary to mark the 30th anniversary of a pivotal moment in the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989.

Speaking alongside her Hungarian counterpart Viktor Orban – with whom she has clashed in recent years over the issue of migration – Merkel said the Pan-European Picnic held at the Austro-Hungarian border in 1989 reflected the values of solidarity, freedom and a humane Europe.

The two leaders were addressing a church service in the city of Sopron to mark the anniversary of the picnic, during which at least 600 East Germans crossed the border and escaped to freedom in the West.

The first mass exodus of East Germans since the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, it was seen as a key factor in the fall of the wall itself three months later.

The commemoration is a rare encounter between the two of the great survivors of European politics, with Merkel in office since 2005 and Orban since 2010.

Their last major bilateral meeting was in July 2018 when Orban made his first visit to Berlin for three years.

It was an awkward affair during which their divisions were on full display and Merkel accused Orban of failing to respect humanity with his harsh anti-immigration policies.

Orban has been a sharp critic of Merkels 2015 decision to open German borders to those fleeing Middle Eastern conflict zones.

Liberation from the Soviet yoke

In his address to the service in Sopron, Orban hailed the fact that the events of 30 years ago had cleared the way towards German reunification.

Hungarians had always known that our liberation from the Soviet yoke would be definitive endure only once Germany was united, he added.

Merkel recalled her own memories of seeing plans for the pinic advertised in 1989.

She remembered the uncertainty and worry when it became apparent the pinic had turned into an escape to the West.

Everyone knew how the uprising in East Germany in 1953 turned out, as well as the one in Hungary in 1956 and the Prague Spring, she added.

She praised the courage and humanity of the Hungarian border guards who didnt fire on the crowds.

The two leaders were both personally marked by the events of 1989 but have since taken starkly diverging political directions.

Merkels upbringing in communist East Germany imbued her with a belief in the importance of liberal values in politics and free market economics.

Orban by contrast, while starting as a young liberal centrist in 1989, sees the events of that year as the first step for the nations of eastern Europe to re-establish their sovereignty.

Last week Merkels spokesman Steffen Seibert admitted that the differences of opinion between the two leaders on issues such as refugee policy were well known and that they would tackle current events in their discussions.

Despite the political tensions between the two, Hungary and Germany enjoy close economic relations.

Germany is Hungarys largest trading partner and a major source of foreign investment, particularly in the form of the mighty German car industry.

Kaynak/Source: