

Background Text

Wroclaw-Berlin 2016. European Neighbours

Wroclaw is the 2016 European Capital of Culture alongside San Sebastian in Spain. Berlin, in turn, was and continues to be Germany's capital of culture. For this reason, the cities of Wroclaw and Berlin will be at the centre of a number of projects and events focusing on their relationship as European neighbours. In 2016, there will also be a number of other events celebrating the German-Polish relationship: Twenty-five years ago, on 17 June 1991, the Republic of Poland and the Federal Republic of Germany signed the "German-Polish Border Treaty". In that same year, Berlin and Warsaw became partner cities and the German-Polish "Jugendwerk" youth organization was founded. The Oder Partnership, which fosters joint projects, initiatives and exchanges that go beyond the Oder and Neisse Rivers, will also be celebrating its 10-year anniversary in 2016.

The Berlin-based forum for civic responsibility known as Stiftung Zukunft Berlin has taken the opportunity together with the European City of Culture Wroclaw and partners drawn from culture, politics, business, science and sport to call attention to the current and historically deep-rooted relationship between Wroclaw and Berlin. The programme will reflect the meeting-points of these two creative cities and vibrant societies. The cultural and artistic exchange between Berlin and Wroclaw has never been as intense as it is today, and the common experience of the European Capital of Culture will open up the opportunity for an even closer collaboration. And yet, what exactly connects these two cities that are so different in both size and appearance? What social parallels are there? What effect have various factors – such as migration, flight and displacement, but also the wave of freedom after 1989 – had on these two societies?

Berlin and Wroclaw have encountered one another many times in history. Both were members of the Hanseatic League and experienced their first economic Golden Age in the late Middle Ages. Both cities were – albeit in different eras – centres of German-speaking literature. Also, roughly 120 years ago, the group of avant-garde architects around Hans Scharoun, Erich Mendelsohn, Hans Poelzig and Max Berg worked in both cities on buildings found there today. Music has also played a major role since the very beginning; this year will mark the opening of the new Music Forum in Wroclaw with over 2,000 seats. The Jazz scene, too, is experiencing a blossoming of artistic exchange.

Both cities were shaped by migration; both lived under all types of regimes. Over the years, they also both proved what an active civil society can achieve and what kinds of obstacles and repression can actually be overcome. The "Peaceful Revolution" in 1989, which led to the fall of the Berlin Wall, was directly inspired by events in Poland. In turn, Wroclaw was the site of a student movement called the "Orange Alternative" which gained in importance as a result of their organised events and, of course, their characteristic graffiti "dwarfs". These dwarfs continue to influence Wroclaw to this day – in the form of small statues found throughout the city.

The relationship between Wroclaw and Berlin is a timely one and has many deep historical roots. It is marked by neighbourly relations, the ability to make new starts, common histories, the overcoming of enmities, rare displays of strength, for example by Wroclaw's Cardinal Bolesław Kominek, and ongoing mutual influences. Most of all, however, it is marked by places and people in both cities, by social life and a vibrant culture.



Wroclaw is a unique city of 630,000 inhabitants, 12 islands and 112 bridges, a dense network of streets and highways, the Oder River as a waterway, an international airport and thus an important junction in the Oder region. It has a strong economic infrastructure that enables a vibrant exchange in science and the IT industry. Indeed, in the IT industry, Wroclaw and Berlin play leading roles in their respective regions and countries, thus engendering increasingly close collaborations between companies based in the two cities. They also enjoy close ties in "traditional" sectors, such as inland waterway transport: the Wroclaw-based transport ships from OT Logistics are ubiquitous on Berlin's waterways.

Today's Europe is facing a number of challenges, which makes it all the more important to understand and encourage a sense of neighbourly cohesion that goes beyond the geographical realm. Indeed, citizens of both cities need to find paths to one another. Wroclaw and Berlin have always led the way in this respect, and they will continue to do so. It is beneficial to both cities to foster a joint cultural heritage and a shared membership in the European Union, as well as common cultural, economic and political interests. Connectedness and closeness, a commitment to civil society in both urban areas, and the shared experience of Wroclaw's tenure as European Capital of Culture 2016: these open up the opportunity for cities to engage in even closer cooperation with one another.

What connects two capitals of culture in the heart of Europe? The "Wroclaw-Berlin 2016. European Neighbours" project gives us several clues and invites us to attend events, exhibitions, concerts, films and discussions over the course of the year.

Wroclaw-Berlin 2016. European Neighbours is a co-initiative of Stiftung Zukunft Berlin and the European Capital of Culture Wroclaw 2016 in cooperation with Hewlett Packard Enterprise Corporation, the German Federal Cultural Foundation, Kulturprojekte Berlin GmbH, LUNETTA, Mediapool GmbH and Mica Moca project berlin e.V. With support from the LOTTO Foundation Berlin and the City of Wroclaw.