

WELCOMING ADDRESS
of H.E. László KÖVÉR, Speaker of the Hungarian National Assembly
(Bern, March 18, 2019)

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Swiss friends,

„Everything for the people, everything with the people, nothing about the people without asking the people. That is democracy.” – these words were spoken by the leader of the 1848-49 Hungarian revolution and freedom fight, Lajos Kossuth, and in Europe today, these words are probably best understood in Switzerland, the homeland of direct democracy. This is why we feel especially pleased and honoured that today, we can remember the Hungarian revolution and freedom fight that broke out on March 15th, 1848 together with you.

Kossuth used these words in the General Assembly of the State of Ohio in the United States in 1852 to identify the eternal and indefeasible content of democracy, arching over the period from the 19th to the 21st century unaltered. Abraham Lincoln, the future president of the United States also sat in the audience.

For Hungarians, freedom has meant for centuries the aspiration for state sovereignty, national self-determination and social justice. Fighting to defend Christian Europe and left to its fate by contemporary European powers, the medieval Hungarian state received a fatal blow in the battlefield of Mohacs in 1526, outnumbered by the Ottoman army, and later lost its territorial integrity and sovereignty as a result. From this point, every new generation of Hungarians saw it as their historical responsibility to restore the sovereignty of the Hungarian state and to ensure national and intellectual self-determination for the Hungarians. This aspiration fuelled our freedom fight from 1604-1606 in the 17th century, led by István Bocskai who appears in the Reformation Wall Monument in Geneva, the same aspiration fired the freedom fight between 1703-1711 in the 18th century, led by Ferenc Rákóczi II, and the same mission was accomplished in 1848-49, when Lajos Kossuth and his fellow freedom fighters not only restored the sovereignty of our national state, but also laid the foundations for transition to a civic society, a new social order resting on the pillars of social justice and equality before the law.

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In the 19th century, Hungarian freedom was overrun by European "Realpolitik", the great powers of the West and the East, i.e. the collusion of the Habsburg Monarchy and Tsarist Russia. The 150 thousand strong Hungarian revolutionary forces successfully defended the cause of the revolution against the 165 thousand soldiers of the Habsburg military, but were forced to surrender when the 193 thousand troops of Tsarist Russian army intervened in the military action.

After the revolution was put down, Hungary was subjected to a regime of humiliation and tyranny, with her patriots sent to the gallows, to prison, forced conscription and into exile.

In those years, several prominent Hungarian emigrees found asylum in Switzerland, including Countess Antonia Batthyány née Zichy, the widow of Count Lajos Battyány, Hungary's first responsible Prime Minister who suffered martyrdom, and General György Klapka, the heroic defender of the Fort of Komárom. They both settled down in Geneva.

The Hungarian desire for freedom – trodden down in the 19th century - erupted again in the 20th century in 1956, but the anti-communist revolution of the Hungarians was quenched in blood by the Soviet army, superior in numbers. Switzerland proved its solidarity even then: following 1956, approximately 14 000 Hungarian political refugees found a new home in Switzerland, who – by their exemplary integration into Swiss society – became the respected citizens of their new homeland. On behalf of Hungary, we thank Switzerland again for her solidarity through history.

In addition to the refugees of 1956 and their descendants - who are now Swiss citizens - the most recent statistical surveys show that today, approximately 25 000 Hungarian citizens live and work permanently in Switzerland, thus the total Hungarian population in the Federal State can be estimated at 45-50 thousand people. These Hungarians are loyal and hard-working citizens of Switzerland and at the same time faithful members of the Hungarian nation.

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Friendship and close relations between our countries are what characterise every area of life, be it trade and investment relations or scientific and foreign affairs cooperation in international organisations.

In the Hungarian National Assembly, we established the friendship group dedicated to deepening the friendly relations between our countries in February. According to my information, MPs committed to developing interparliamentary relations in the Swiss Federal Assembly will re-establish the Switzerland - Hungary Friendship Group in the coming days.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

The desire for individual and collective freedoms, the commitment to independence and democracy not only constitute an unbroken link between successive generations of Hungarians, but also unite Hungary and the Hungarians with every country and people in Europe who wish to build our shared European future on mutual understanding, respect for the traditions, languages and cultures of nations, the strengthening of our communities – first and foremost our families – and the acceptance of the sovereignty of states. This was the dream pursued by the most prominent Hungarians 171 years ago, this is what we wanted to achieve after 1988, the year when the regime change began, and it is to achieve these same goals that we have been using the opportunities for action acquired through democratic legitimacy since 2010.

To achieve these goals, we are looking for partners at home and in the world. But as professed by our forefathers during the 1848 revolution, and as the Hungarian saying goes to the present day: - we make no concessions from the goals of 48.

In the spirit of our national holiday, on behalf of the Hungarian National Assembly, may I – using the watchword of the 1848 revolutionaries – say to every Hungarian compatriot and every one of our Swiss friends *„Let there be Peace, Liberty and Agreement!”*