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Interview with Hans Gert Pöttering, President of the European Parliament ret. and Chairman of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. Interviewer: Maciej Makulski

MACIEJ MAKULSKI: Can we, as Europeans, be proud citizens of the European Union these days?

HANS GERT PÖTTERING: I can only give you an answer from my own political experience. When I was elected to the European Parliament for the first time in 1979, Europe was divided. Poland – the country in which we are having this conversation – was a member of the Warsaw Pact, while Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were members of the Soviet Union. At the time, we were facing the development of Solidarność, with the activities of such people as Lech Wałęsa as well as John Paul II, and finally the Soviet Union collapsed. This was the miracle of my time. But it was not just the collapse of the USSR, but something behind it, which was not only political or historical; it was philosophical in the sense that finally the values we believe in – the dignity of the human being – succeeded. Neither the communist system based on social classes, nor National Socialism based on racism were successful; but finally our Christian – or you can call it European – values prevailed. This was a great success in our time and now it is not possible to change this attitude as such. All of this – democracy, freedom, the liberal order and the fact that we are united in the European Union – is a miracle of my generation. I always hoped it would be possible one day, but it was not expected to happen during my time. So let us be proud that finally our idea – the dignity of the human being – prevailed and succeeded. I think that thanks to this development we can be self-confident – with modesty, which is always needed – and our current problems with nationalism or populism must be overcome by determination of those who believe in our values.

We can probably agree that all you have said about our values is shared by European elites. However, I am afraid that concepts such as human dignity are seen as “big issues” which are not subjects of concern for most Europeans in their everyday life. People have their own problems and they expect from the EU something more concrete or pragmatic than discussions about values. Is it possible to convince the majority to being proud Europeans?

Each generation has its own problems and challenges and nothing is given forever. We should never take for granted what we have already achieved. And if we do not defend what we have achieved and develop it further, then everything will collapse again and the European past with all its tragedies will return to our continent. We need to have a dialogue with our citizens and tell them what a great success it is to be in the society in which we are, even with all its problems, disadvantages and everything we did not succeed in. Yet, if we compare our society (particularly in Poland, Germany and other countries) with those of other continents – maybe with the exception of Australia – the problems there are greater than those in the European Union. It is then worth to defend our way of living in accordance with our values. It is an effort we have to make and I think in the end the large majority of our society will defend it. We have to be very strong in convincing people that populism and nationalism are positions of the past.

Have you ever considered the concept of many circles of integration as a potential way of development for the European Union? I mean not only the division for the core of Europe and its peripheries, but also – let's call it – circles of specialisation, such as EU Eastern policy, which could be a subject of concern for Poland and Germany, while other parts of Europe are not so deeply interested in the region.

I think we have to always see different levels of political behaviour's identity. There is a local level, then a regional level (within a country), a national one and the European level. All these levels always find themselves within some contradiction and this applies to European politics as well. However, a very important thing is that all of these layers move – more or less – in the same direction. If you differentiate too much within Europe, it could lead to a split into different groups – north and south, rich and poor, conservative, Christian and so on. My idea of the European Union is that we should move together especially when it comes to big questions at the European level. And if there is a country that currently does not want to move together in that direction, we should allow it to join later. Let's take security and defence issues; thanks to a special article, the Lisbon treaty allows each country to participate or not – in which all countries can be united; but we leave the opportunity for other countries to follow in the future. And it has been decided that we finally move in the same direction.

Let us focus on Polish-German relations. In 2011, on the 20th anniversary of the Treaty of Good Neighbourship and Friendly Cooperation between Poland and Germany, it was highlighted that after joining the EU Poland lost its "main goal" of bilateral cooperation. In this context the list of unresolved tasks included, for instance, the lack of vision for the Weimar triangle as well as a common policy towards Russia and other Eastern European

countries. Would you characterise our bilateral relations in such a way or would you opt for a completely new list of challenges?

I think these are questions regarding institutions and policy-related substance. And the most important is the latter. In the case of our policies towards Russia, Polish-German relations should always be part of European Union policy in such a way that there is a task for both countries to formulate their own views on Russia and then to find a compromise within the European Union. On this ground the EU has been quite successful, if we consider the strong voice of condemnation of Russia's aggression against Ukraine as well as the EU's sanctions against Russia. Of course Poland would like to go further, alongside the Baltic States, but there are other countries like Italy or Greece which would prefer to do nothing in terms of greater engagement in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. We were successful to find a compromise in the case of sanctions with a strong Polish influence. However, if Poland had not been part of the EU, it would have achieved nothing in this matter. Acting within the EU, the Polish voice is simply stronger because it has the possibility to influence other countries. In such a context, I think that bilateral relations should always be a part of the entire European Union.

There are opinions that after the October 2015 election, Poland will have a lesser impact on the EU concerning Eastern Europe. However, has Poland ever had the opinion of an expert within the EU regarding the Eastern neighborhood?

Polish society has a better understanding of what is going on in Ukraine than people in Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece or even Germany do. So we – the EU – should benefit from Polish knowledge concerning Ukraine. This knowledge does not change with a government. Despite the government change, the knowledge as such remains the same. But it is very important that all governments – and I am not criticising anyone but speaking objectively – of EU member states have the confidence of other governments. It means that if the government of an EU member state loses the confidence of other governments within the European Union, its influence will diminish. So my advice to the German government, or the Polish one, is to do everything so that the confidence in the country's policy remains strong. When confidence in a country diminishes, then the benefits coming from particular experience vis-à-vis a third country diminish immediately too. So it is important that confidence between different governments remains high.

You have mentioned two dimensions of politics – substantive and institutional. Taking into account the latter, would you consider establishing a new kind of Polish-German format of cooperation, similar to common institutions for supporting democratic processes and procedures in other parts of the world? While we do have many good

examples of Polish-German institutions or projects, they were established in a very particular moment of history to achieve concrete goals in the field of broadly defined Polish-German reconciliation. Maybe new formats would help set visionary objectives for Poland and Germany in the international area?

I think it is not a question of institutions, but a question of political will and trust. And I think there is a great challenge for Polish-German relations in the question of trust. If there is no trust you cannot influence developments in third countries. So the condition of influence on other countries is that Poland and Germany closely cooperate and trust each other. I do not believe in new institutions. I believe in strengthening policy, and all governments should know that our common future is the European Union. If there is no such thinking, then the trust vanishes away. Each country – including Poland and Germany – should prove in their everyday policy that Europe is our way. To give you a symbolic example: it was a very bad message when the new Polish government during a press conference with the Prime Minister took away the European flag. There was immediately a doubt as to whether the EU was still important for Polish policy. I think we should do everything we can to prevent the decrease of trust and confidence between the EU member states' governments. We should make it clear: if we go back to nationalism and a situation in which each country tries to solve its problems alone, then we all are lost on all fronts – on immigrant influx, the crisis in Ukraine, North Africa's development, terrorism and so on. No European country can solve its problems alone.

I wanted to ask about the institutional dimension of politics because it is very important for stimulating bottom up processes of cooperation, including its international aspect. And such an everyday cooperation, as you have mentioned, is maintained on civil society's level as well. It helps – I believe – to maintain cooperation between countries even during tough periods at the intergovernmental level.

I agree that we have not only relations between governments, but we need to use, day by day, all networks at different levels. We should remember that levels below the governmental one are always very important. If there is no trust between people, the cooperation between governments will not be fruitful.

In my opinion, one problem with the refugee issue in Europe is that people do not personally know any refugees but are against newcomers to the European Union. In the German region of Saxony, for instance, we have the most hostile attitudes towards refugees, while there are only few of them compared to other parts of Germany. So people simply do not know them. But if they knew them, they would know they are human beings like you and me. So I believe in dialogue and the exchange of opinions.

Regarding what you have already said, how does the problem of the lack of knowledge regarding each other influence Polish-German relations?

Of course, one should always increase knowledge about each other. But I think that Polish-German relations have changed over the last few years in a positive way. For instance, in Germany we had for ages the term *Polnische Wirtschaft* (which means Polish economy) to describe the Polish economy in a rather pejorative way. Today we can speak about the Polish economy in a very positive sense, because Poland has developed enormously in the last few years and the negative stereotype regarding *Polnische Wirtschaft* has changed into a positive one. Poles are very effective and that shows how stereotypes can be changed. I also think that Germans are not “the bad guys” for Poles anymore, as they were in the past. So currently we should not allow anyone to return to the past and speak negatively about each other. I think Germans were never as positive about Poland and Poles as they are today. We are equal partners.

Hans Gert Pöttering is a German politician and former President of the European Parliament (2007-2009). He was elected in the first direct election to the European Parliament in 1979 and was the only MEP exercising its mandate continuously for 35 years. He is also the Chairman of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (Konrad Adenauer Foundation).

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