

Acceptance of the past is a step toward the future

Warsaw – in honour of the 40th anniversary of Willy Brandt’s visit in Warsaw, on December 7, 2010 the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in Poland and the Center for International Relations jointly organized the conference “Europe: A Continent of Reconciliation?”. The conference highlighted the significance of Chancellor Brandt’s New Eastern Policy for the reconciliation between Poles and Germans. Both the principle of transformation through closer ties and the European road to reconciliation remain relevant to this very day. Indeed, they offer a model for regional conflicts around the entire globe.

At the beginning of the conference the head of the Center for International Relations, **Janusz Reiter**, and the President of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, **Anke Fuchs**, stressed the meaning of Brandt’s visit in Warsaw, which has gone down in history as a symbol of reconciliation. The topic of reconciliation, they stated, has lost



none of its relevance in light of the fact that many countries around the world still await such a breakthrough in their mutual relations. Anke Fuchs characterized Willy Brandt’s gesture of kneeling at the monument to the Heroes of the Ghetto as “unexpected, unique, and very personal. For us young social-democrats it simply took our breath away”. Years later Brandt himself described his gesture as “what people do when words fail them”. Brandt’s political message was simple, and his goal clear: to surmount the division of Europe through admission of guilt. Today European politics faces the task of shouldering responsibility for further processes of reconciliation and “giving new impetus to European vistas”.

Throughout the conference speakers emphasized the need to undertake further strides on behalf of Europe. The historian **Fritz Stern** was not alone in voicing regret over the rebirth of political nationalisms and egoism. The onetime passion for Europe has been supplanted with an attitude of rivalry – moreover, the West’s liberal ideals are experiencing crisis. Stern underlined the meaning of thinking about the West as a whole and of maintaining a transatlantic perspective for reinvigorating Enlightenment ideals. True courage is required of the efforts to be undertaken as they risk temporary political losses. But the effect of political shortsightedness, Stern stated, includes the danger of

instrumentalizing the current economic difficulties along with the possible renewal of prejudices. What must be done, therefore, is to renew the European spirit, and treat the current crisis as an opportunity for the further development of the European economic and social model. Reiter pointed out that many regions of Europe today do not evince interest in adopting Europe’s rules, even when they could garner new strength by doing so. “We must not underestimate the power of the irrational”, he cautioned. Indeed, Europe must avoid a situation in which European states vie with each another, and in which the onetime Euro-enthusiasm might shatter against unyielding political facts.

But what about the stability of European reconciliation? This was the question before the panel discussion **“Emotions, Symbols, Politics – Europe as a Continent of Reconciliation”**. What happened 40 years ago is often perceived as part of a logical chain of events with a “happy ending”, the panelists said. **Gesine Schwan**, President of the Humboldt-Viadrina School of Governance, explained that in the case of ongoing processes of reconciliation everything depends on the “symmetry of respect”. After all, for Poland and Germany what was decisive was the fact that not only political elites met as equals, but so did organs of civil society.



Poland’s President **Bronisław Komorowski** stated that in 1970 the road to reconciliation was still open. And he called for taking reconciliatory steps today toward Europe’s eastern neighbours, stressing that the course of history reveals the true meaning of gestures like Brandt’s, and that genuine reconciliation must reflect the desire of nations as a whole, and not just the pursuit of politicians.

In this context Germany’s President **Christian Wulff** reminded those gathered in Warsaw’s Royal Castle that what seems obvious today was achieved through hard, committed work. He stressed the growing role of Poland in Europe and stated that “trust and good will between partners requires regular meetings”. Wulff said that for him Willy Brandt was “a man with the strength of freedom – and above all a man of reconciliation” who on behalf of Germany displayed unprecedented respect and created prospects for the future. In this same context President Wulff cited Poland’s Solidarity movement, which courageously announced that change had to come. Wulff at once added: “I thank those Poles who waged the battle for freedom for Europe and for Germany”. Without Poland’s driving force, closer European cooperation and Europe’s efficiency are unthinkable, said **Sigmar**



Gabriel, leader of Germany’s Social Democratic Party (SDP). He stressed the urgent need to strengthen international law as Europe is something more than merely a unified market with individual interests. Gabriel also said that without a creative and constructive energy Europe as Europe will not attain a place of importance in the



multipolar world. Thus, Europe needs to take concrete measures in foreign and security policy. Matters concerning European foreign policy were at the heart of the afternoon’s panel discussion **“The Policy of Détente – a Model for European Foreign Policy?”**. Poland’s former minister for foreign affairs Adam Rotfeld offered a concise response to this question: “What we need are innovations, courage, and simple humanity”. He then asked, what surpassing idea is Europe pursuing? This, he said, does not concern normal

legislative work, but rather its real implementation in democratic practice – and this is lacking in many countries. Institutions should be developed in reliance on their tasks, as what is relevant is effectiveness, not elegance: “We must understand that the EU is not a structure, but a process”. The panelists gave careful attention to the problem of political populism. Pragmatic thinking of course dictates the deepening of European integration and the creation of new institutions. Nonetheless, we are witnessing the opposite tendency, with its telltale shortsighted pronouncements, said **Martin Schulz**, Chairman of the Social Democratic Fraction in the European Parliament. “There is a dilemma between unpopular, though necessary policies, and policies that win quick popularity, although they leads down a blind alley. Europe must be understood as an added value, and not a substitute. For where the reach of national frameworks ends, that’s where the European added value begins”.

The final discussion panel, **“Does Europe Offer a Model for Meeting Global challenges?”**, focused on Europe’s role in efforts designed to secure peace and security in the world – for example, in regions affected by crisis such as the western Balkans or the Near East. Europe is a continent of self-reflection, boasted France’s former defence minister **Alain Richard**, who at the same time criticized the lack of preparedness to cede the nation-state’s sovereignty: “There is a danger of using history as a political instrument”. The balanced social model with a strong equilibrium of interests is the latest milestone in Europe’s structure, said Richard, going on to refer to the strength of those European countries that have built up their social component. In the global context Europe is still a sufficient model for economic, social, and cultural development, stated **Egon Bahr**, former federal minister and “the architect of *Neue Ostpolitik*”. After the end of the conflict between the West and the East, and having avoided new wars, Europe

secured for itself significantly more security than any other continent. But there is still a lack of structural clarity, as – in place of that – there are duplicate competencies and an incapacity to make decisions. “So long as Europe fails to speak with one voice, it will remain incapable of action”, said Bahr, stressing that people must be sought who have ideas and the power of persuasion. Bahr went on to say that a large measure of responsibility rests with Poland: “Today the future of Europe is in the hands of the Poles”.



Reconciliation in Europe is important not only with regard to peace, but also so that Europe can meet the challenges of a globalized world. Former President of the European Parliament **Enrique Barón Crespo** noted the growing need for the effective safeguarding of European values in the multipolar world: “Besides the guarantee of peace, Europe today must also secure the reality in which people live out their lives, by affording greater attention to social justice”.

During the conference’s closing portion, Poland’s Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski focused once again on Willy Brandt, dubbing him “a European by conviction, and a citizen of the world by calling” who was far ahead of his time. Sikorski labeled Brandt’s visit in Warsaw a milestone on the road to European unity. His Eastern Policy bore fruit: without reconciliation with her Western neighbour Poland’s road to NATO and the EU would have remained closed. But today the need is to convince the citizens of Europe to expand European integration as a matter of principle. Pointing to Europe’s significance in the face of global challenges and the reconciliations yet to become a reality, former ambassador Reiter closed the conference by stressing the new European sense of responsibility that cannot be subjected to emotional vicissitudes: “Dialogue will proceed ahead, dialogue must proceed ahead!”.

All photographs taken by Piotr Bulaś

The complete transcript of the conference and related documentation is available at: www.40-jahre-ostpolitik.de