

Knut Dethlefsen, Director of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Warsaw office, talks to Pawel Sikorski from the trade union publication "Budowlani"

The cold shower is going to do us good

The Friedrich Ebert Foundation is probably one of the longest-standing organisations of its type in Germany. How did it come about and what led its founders to propose the establishment this foundation?

The foundation was established in 1925 after the death of the first democratically elected president of the Weimar Republic. Friedrich Ebert, born as the son of a tailor, later a leader of the Social Democratic Party and a person elected to serve in the highest state offices – believed „there is no democracy without democrats“. Today many would shrug it off as trite, but don't forget what the situation was in the former half of the 1920s. At that time Mussolini took over in Italy, the Bolsheviks strengthened their hold in Russia, and political and economic instability swept across Europe. Generally, the climate did not foster democracy. Ebert and his co-workers understood the key to change the frame of mind in society lied in political education. They believed that bridges between the particular layers of society, and between European nations, could only be built in an educated and informed society. It was at the Social Democratic Party (SPD) congress in 1925 that the idea of co-operation instead of competition at international scale, essentially the concept seen to emerge much later in the European Communities, and eventually in the European Union, was put forward for a first time. Such concepts were truly revolutionary ideas at that time. in the best sense of the word. That was why Friedrich Ebert in his will directed the executors to continue to spread his ideas after his death.

The form and scope of activity of the Foundation evolved with time.

At first we worked on a modest scale. Our activities were led by just several of individuals who worked gratuitously. Just a few years since it took off the Foundation was subjected to a tough ordeal. When the Nazis came to power in 1933 they banned the Foundation. Most of the people who were linked to the Foundation emigrated from Germany fearing repressions. The Foundation was reinstated in 1947. The idea was then brought forward to take its activities also outside Germany and, where possible, to promote our values. That undertaking was made easier by connections established in the years people were in emigration. Our priorities had not changed essentially. As we did at inception, in our activity we are keen to support education in the political area, to strengthen the spirit of democracy and pluralism, to give young people opportunities to develop by granting scholarships. The only difference is that nowadays we work worldwide. That of course is an effect of globalisation and integration between countries under way for years now. The main areas the Foundation currently addresses in its activity are social cohesion, the culture of democracy, innovation and participation and globalisation in a spirit of solidarity. As a private institution working for the public benefit and for cultural development we represent the fundamental ideas of the SPD.

The SPD, the party you have always been closely associated with, is not in its heyday now, to put it mildly.

Generally, the left in Europe is not in its best condition. I am not one to play that down, but I wouldn't overestimate that fact either. I think this is, quite simply, the pendulum of history at work, with voter sympathies swinging. The SPD did indeed lose the latest election, but I am confident that cold shower is going to do us good. In my view, we, as a party, need to open up to people and to return to work at the grassroots. I think we recently failed to listen closely to the ordinary man in the street. We were overly confident in the power of the media or modern communications. So we need again to realise that elections are won in the streets, not just on TV screens. I also think the competition succeeded in persuading many of our voters that we had abandoned our traditional values. Not so. In the last ten years we indeed saw ourselves forced to put

through many unpopular reforms, but that was indispensable for our country not to go broke. I want it to be very clear: thanks to the SPD in government Germany managed to keep in place its model of social market economy. The German state has retained its pro-social character. Let us hope the current coalition government is not going to begin to take this model apart.

To come back to the Foundation itself, when did you start working in Poland?

First contacts were established shortly after Social Democratic Chancellor Willy Brandt's memorable visit here in December 1970. Regular exchanges of journalists and scholars followed. I think that was the beginning of real social dialogue between Germans and Poles. It produced effects, such as, e.g., the partnership established between Gdańsk and Bremen. Today such things surprise no one, but over thirty years back that was truly a vanguard position. Obviously, opening an office in Poland was out of question before the fall of the Iron Curtain. The time to do that came after the political changes.

What effects do you expect to from your co-operation with social partners in Poland?

Through our activities we would like to galvanise Polish-German relations. Now, with the Lisbon Treaty ratified, we are facing a number of challenges in the area of social affairs in the broad sense. The advancing integration in a way enforces the definition of common positions and the undertaking of joint actions with actors in different countries. The time we could gain anything playing our games „in our own backyard” is over for good. To find answers to current questions it is necessary to prepare such quests well, and to put a lot of effort in doing that. If we work together, if we know and trust each other, we can accomplish that easier. Beyond that, the FES has a mandate to represent the Confederation of German Trade Unions (DGB) abroad. Quite simply, we expect our activity to contribute to improving co-operation between trade unions in our countries. The way it is true that there is no democracy without democrats, it is equally true to say there are no civilised standards of work without unions. We need to learn from each other, undertake joint actions to promote best practises in the work place and, my personal ambition, to reach out to young people and to encourage them to adopt our values. To paraphrase your Renaissance poet Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski: “trade unions are going to be such as the education of the young”.