

A common future for Poland and Germany?

Dr Krzysztof Tokarz talks to Knut Dethlefsen, Director of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation Warsaw Office

Dr Krzysztof Tokarz: Erika Steinbach and the expellees still feature prominently in Polish-German relations. Is there no more important business to tackle than that?

Knut Dethlefsen: Sadly, we spend so much time discussing the expellees. I'm sure there are more important matters in Polish-German relations than those to do with Erika Steinbach.

The best thing we can do is, quite simply, pay less attention to matters such as that one in the future. I wish the German chancellor solved the Steinbach case as quickly as possible and turned to more important matters in Polish-German relations. Our primary interest should be to focus more closely on issues connected with our common future, of course learning lessons from the past. We now live in Europe with the Lisbon treaty in place. We can put our heads together to see where Poles and Germans can join forces to get Europe more integrated and European institutions working more efficiently. Germans and Poles could be a driving force in Europe. I know there is still a long way to get such plans done and in place. Yet these are intriguing issues which deserve to be discussed and pondered as we are setting out to develop our common European project. Obviously, both Germany and Poland stand to benefit from European integration. Our security has increased, we have become good neighbours, we live in a peaceful and prosperous environment. Both countries do have a vested interest in keeping things that way.

Gerhard Schröder helped Poland in its European Union accession. That was forgotten in no time. Do you think good relations with Germany's social democracy are possible? You represent a foundation which is close to the SPD.

KD: the Friedrich Ebert Foundation is social democratic political foundation. We are independent from the party, but we stand by social democratic values. One very important person for us is Willy Brandt, who, when he stepped down as Chancellor, co-operated with the Foundation very closely. He contributed to the democratization of Spain and Portugal. Since then his ideas, as well as practical actions, have become part of the legacy of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. International politics cannot be left to the government alone. We are responsible for organising dialogue in civic society on international issues. – As for your query about relations with social democrats with Poland: If you look at the history of Polish-German relations, I'm sure you can see right away that social democrats were in the first line of those seeking to establish normal relations with Poland. – From the very beginning social democrats were ready to square up with German history. No less than take responsibility for the guilt of Germans. Social democrats were themselves persecuted, murdered, detained in concentration camps, or forced to emigrate. There were among the first victims of the Nazis, even though they were not the only victims. Willy Brandt as a very young man had to emigrate and fought against Nazi Germany from abroad. He was not the only one. Many German social democrats were in emigration in those years. That's why social democrats found it easier to walk the road to reconciliation. The most important change came in the 1960s though. Social democrats had an idea for a rapprochement with the East. They wanted to find a road to East and West resuming relations, and to a détente which would make possible the unification of Europe. The unification of Europe, as well as paving the way for the unification of Germany, was the aim right from the start. That aim, however, could only

be achieved in a stable and peaceful environment. Another aim was to improve living conditions for people in Poland and in the GDR. Such actions were intended to create humanitarian conditions for those who suffered living in a totalitarian system. The way I see it, social democracy was, next to the churches, the decisive driving force behind Polish-German understanding in the 1960s and 1970s. In the final account, the road to what came later had been laid then. The Treaty signed in Warsaw had in it all that was found in the later treaty on good neighbourly relations. Recognition of the borders, waiver of territorial claims, good neighbourly relations.

Do you think so quick an understanding would have been possible at all in the 1990s without Willy Brandt?

The Eastern Treaties and subsequently the Treaty in Warsaw normalised political and diplomatic relations. Indeed, they made it possible for the two countries to start talking at all. Brandt's kneeling down before the monument to the victims of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was spontaneous. It was a symbol, which made possible the reconciliation. Brandt once said he knelt down because he was in a place where as a German in Poland he thought he should make some gesture. As strong a gesture as did Brandt when he knelt had not been recorded in German history before.

What is your opinion of Brandt and his policies?

Willy Brandt was someone of great importance. There's no denying that in the European setting. Willy Brandt was not merely a party politician or merely a German politician, he was a European politician. He wanted Europe to grow together, so people in Europe could live in freedom and peace. Freedom was a significant motive there. Brandt said that, next to peace, freedom is the most important thing. Later he became strongly involved in the Helsinki process. A peaceful Europe was his aim. He believed that peace is not everything, but nothing is important without peace. These words stand true to this day.

What are the SPD's relations with Poland today?

SPD watches Poland with interest. This is to do with the history of the SPD. What Willy Brandt did set an example. There were many social democratic politicians, city mayors, who supported partnerships with Poland. Think of projects conducted by the organisation Aktion Sühnezeichen, for example. Germany puts great importance on political relations with Poland. There are a number of people in the SPD today with personal and political ties to Poland. Angelika Schwall-Düren, deputy chair of the SPD caucus in the Bundestag, who has always pleaded for good relations with Poland, leads Polish-German societies now. But others too are engaged in relations with Poland. Sigmar Gabriel, the SPD chairman, used to travel to Poland in the 1980s and has still some close ties here on the Vistula. I think no other party in Germany is as strongly interested in partnerships with Poland.

In Poland, the SPD is viewed as pro-Russian. Gerhard Schröder is unequivocally considered to be so.

Gerhard Schröder is unquestionably a prominent German politician. As chancellor he accomplished quite a lot for Europe and for Germany. For international relations as well. He made many right decisions. Think of his „No“ to the war in Iraq, which turned out to have been a disaster for the whole region. At the time it would have been reasonable for the Polish government to follow his example. Schröder understood that for Germany – as for all of Europe – it is of paramount importance to cultivate relations with important partners. Russia is important for Germany. Without a stable Russia we are bound to face great problems in Europe. It should be said openly that Schröder was very closely engaged in working with Poland at the same time. He used to visit Poland often, and he

did more than many a European politician to help Poland on its road to the European Union. This merit of his must be acknowledged.

Many people forget that were it not for Schröder's help Poland would not have joined the EU that fast. Poland could have had to wait for accession much longer.

At that time the Czechs and Slovaks said Poland faced so many problems they had no intention to wait for that country. Then Gerhard Schröder said: „No – we do need Poland in the European Union”. That was a very important political signal. That European integration, the joint growth of Europe, is a political project, not just purely an economic or legal undertaking, is the common understanding in the SPD.

Former German foreign minister, and at the same time a leading figure of German social democracy, Frank Walter Steinmeier also used to come to Poland.

He was many times in Poland. He even spent a weekend in the place of his Polish opposite number, Radosław Sikorski. I know him personally so I know Steinmeier takes very close interest in Poland and that he is not at all „fixed” on Russia alone. Indeed, Steinmeier did a great deal to improve relations with the USA and contributed to stabilisation in the Middle East. He had a very good record as minister of foreign affairs, with a well-balanced pick of points in foreign policy. He did that for Germany to play a noticeable part on the international arena and in contribution to the cause of peaceful co-existence. At the time of the conflict in Georgia he was strongly involved to re-establish peace and stability in the entire region. He cannot possibly be said to be pro-Russian in any way. It has to be noted that there are definite interests we do have with Russia.

What are the main tasks the Friedrich Ebert Foundation has set itself for this year?

To me, the most important job is to organise political debates. I want us to contribute to bringing about a situation in which Polish-German relations do not “run in a circle around themselves”. Take, for instance, the anniversary of „Solidarity”. What remains of its ideals now, what does European solidarity look like today? This can be discussed at different levels. What can we do for European integration, what can we do for Europe to play a major role globally. European integration should not be just a „race down”, but it should contribute to the development of a social standard. This year we plan to recall that 40 years back – on 7 December 1970 – Willy Brandt not only signed the Treaty of Warsaw, but through his gestures paved the way to Polish-German reconciliation. We don't want yet another round of merely historical celebrations to commemorate that, but we are going to talk of his contribution to the politics of détente, and of what it means for European, Polish and German politics. We want to popularise Willy Brandt in Poland.

Thank you for this conversation.