

## **Optimistic about the future**

Social democracy in Europe is clearly in crisis. Only ten years ago social democrats headed a majority of governments in Europe, but now social democratic parties are in power in just 4 of the EU's 27 member countries. For instance, Germany's SPD suffered a historic defeat at the polls last year. At the EU level, the June 2009 elections to the European Parliament gave conservatives a comfortable majority in that body.

That was the topic of the international conference "Finding new answers: Social democracy in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Europe" organized by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in co-operation with the weekly *Polityka* on September 28. Before an audience of one hundred, politicians and political analysts from Poland, Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Spain discussed the context of social democracy's current plight, as well as possible ways out of the crisis.

The first speaker, Poland's former president Aleksander Kwaśniewski, raised what he thought would be the central points of a future social democratic program for Europe. He explained that the first thing to do in designing such a program is to base it on sustainable development: "We must think hard about how we are going to reconcile strong economic growth on the one hand with the barring of inequality on the other". Besides the emancipation of various social groups and a careful handling of migration policies, he continued, this above all requires a redefinition of our understanding of equal opportunities and green policies. Then, with a view to the next ten or twenty years, social democrats must reach out to people with their visions and their solutions to nagging issues, such as the final shape of the European Union.



Martin Schulz, who chairs the Socialist Group in the European Parliament, spoke in the same vein as he characterized the continuous balancing act between national interests and their handling at the international level as the core issue of social democratic policies in

Europe. They have to deal with an economy which essentially spills across borders, but which finds support in social protection systems at the national level only. "So capitalism drives a Ferrari, as labour is left biking", said Schulz.

Social democracy must also clearly define whose interests it truly represents, as politicians increasingly tend to leave so-called "ordinary people" outside the focus of attention. What this

therefore means for social democrats is that they must find a way back to their political base – and not merely by taking up that base’s interests, but by talking to people, as well. In this aim, politicians and political analysts from several countries sat down in three panels to discuss the past, present, and future challenges to social democratic policy in Europe.

The first panel gave the audience a snapshot of social democratic policy in various countries in the European Union. The discussion was meant to bring to light both differences and similarities between national policies. Everybody agreed that the party system is generally in crisis, and that not only the Left must find answers. Professor Peter Lösche, party system analyst from Göttingen University, identified one basic problem of Germany’s SPD in the continuing erosion of its traditional electoral base, which fact has gradually led to a vanishing of its mass-party character in the classic form of members and party structures. “What we in Germany must ever ask ourselves is this: which societal grouping do we intend to reach with our message of change? That is to say: who are the addressees of social democratic policy?”.

Grzegorz Napieralski, chairman of SLD, Poland’s social democratic party, clearly located the addressees as being all those who are socially discriminated against. He stressed the surpassing importance of not letting the Right snatch the Left’s rhetoric and of setting new standards in education and labour policies. Specifically, he said, it is imperative to improve



educational opportunities inside the community, and, given the new organization of labour, to strengthen the role of trade unions. “We must also develop a very clear grasp of the position of the state within the European Union, i.e., how states can protect national economies in the future, as well”, Napieralski urged.

Deputy to the Sejm Marek Borowski pointed out that the old and new EU member states are in very different situations, which is why the Left in particular countries is confronted with varying problems. While Western Europe already enjoys a comfortable level of social protection, in Poland it is still necessary to wage a determined fight for women’s rights and social protection.

In Slovakia, where the social democratic party – despite its significant successes in the latest election – was forced into opposition, the preminent challenge now is to fight the growing

conservatism. This was a central point of Pavol Paška, who chairs the social democratic SMER caucus in the Slovak parliament. Thus, the continual redefinition of the proper areas for social policy is a must, unless we want to put our political credibility at risk, he stressed.

Credibility was also a concern for participants in the debate of the second panel, which was entitled “Focal points of a common policy”. German Bundestag deputy Dietmar Nietan described state control of public goods as the core of any social democratic policy, saying, “Politics means regulating everything the market cannot”. In that context he mentioned equitable access to education and culture, as well as the provision of support for social participation, in the sense of providing better conditions for reconciling work and family life. Moreover, Nietan pointed to the changed working conditions in modern society, where a new form of “alienation” has to be addressed with new forms of political activity. “Where is the real stuff of people’s lives expressed? That is where social democratic policy must begin, and that is where people begin to understand its meaning”.



Professor Tadeusz Kowalik, economist and former adviser to the Solidarity trade union, spoke in particular of the role of the welfare state in reconciling diametrically developing wage structures. The principle to apply in such situations should not be “efficiency *or* equality”, but “efficiency *and* equality”.

He too subscribed to the view that trade unions are a major factor in such processes. Moreover, it should be observed that the EU is quite differentiated as regards the models of capitalism that are practised in its member countries. In the economist’s eyes this can be a stabilizing factor, but one that ever places new challenges before national policies. That interpretation was backed by Wolfgang Schroeder, minister of state with the labour ministry of Brandenburg. But Schroeder cautioned that politicians always have to ask themselves exactly what their purpose is: “Is the welfare state founded on the basis of participatory society, or on alimention?” Social democratic thinking can provide only one answer to this question, and the result thereof must be to put in place a “liberal work model” and in this way to prevent social exclusion. Lubomir Zaoralek, deputy chairman of the Czech social democratic party, ČSSD, thinks it is the continuous shrinking of the middle class that presents the biggest threat to the welfare state. In the Czech Republic, where a sizeable part of the middle class barely make ends meet and only just stays above the poverty line, this can become a serious risk to financing the welfare state model adopted in that country, he

explained. Social democratic policy should therefore seek to end widening wage differences as one of its prime goals. This goal, however, cannot possibly be put through by individual countries in their own national level policies. This is why social democratic visions must not be confined within national boundaries.



The third panel at the conference dealt solely with concepts and visions of social democratic policy at the European level. “The future of Europe requires a new socio-economic deal”, said Antonio Estella, head of international relations with the Spanish think tank *Fundación IDEAS*. The principal challenge to meet there is to translate growth into welfare. In this connection, he stressed, it will also be necessary to adopt a European model for the welfare state, and no such model can ignore social democratic policies. Dr. Barbara Labuda, former Polish ambassador to Luxemburg, picked up this point and criticised the European Left for a lack of vision and for failing to undertake serious analysis of the problems of economic globalization. “What we lack are fresh ideas”, remarked Wojciech Filemonowicz, chairman of the Polish party *SDPL*. But owing to its well-developed international networking, he went on, social democracy has the potential to tackle Europe as a common project. The central factor is solidarity, said Dr. Libor Rouček, vice-president of the European Parliament. Step by step, Solidarity could help dismantle differences inside the EU. To be sure, no such thing as a European *demos* has developed, but perhaps it is time for us finally to drop the idea of any such reference point as a *demos*, Estella suggested. Europe draws its strength from its diversity, and if you take another look you will see there are still many more common points than differences here, he continued.

In the concluding address Knut Dethlefsen, director of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Warsaw, once again stressed how important it is to ponder the above issues in a European context. The conference was designed to inspire people and to spread ideas. Ultimately the purpose of social democratic policies is to get a firm grip on run-away capitalism and to find opportunities for giving globalization a social dimension. “Social justice, freedom, and solidarity” – these are still the central principles of social democracy. It is on these principles that social democracy, as a European movement, stands a good chance of becoming a significant force.