

Aches and pain on the Left

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Only a decade ago 12 of the EU’s 15 countries were governed by social democrats; today in only 7 of the EU’s 27 countries is the Left in power. Just recently there was the stunning election defeat of the Social Democrats in Sweden, for decades seen as the bastion and pride of the European Left. Not even the dire economic crisis that had undermined and compromised the practice of liberal capitalism (or so it might have seemed) has improved the ranking of the Euro-Left.

What has happened with social democracy? What mistakes has it made? What kind of program should it pursue today, and what should it focus on if it wants to return to power? These were the main questions raised during the unusually interesting debate held during the international conference organized on September 28 by the weekly news magazine POLITYKA and Germany’s Friedrich Ebert Foundation (nota bene: we at POLITYKA are planning similar such debates with the participation of other European “political families”).

The debate was opened by Poland’s former president Aleksander Kwaśniewski and Martin Schulz, the leader of the Socialists in the European Parliament, and who in 2012 will succeed Jerzy Buzek’s as President of the Parliament. Taking part in the three panel discussions (moderated by Jacek Żakowski, Edwin Bendyk, and Adam Krzemiński) were prominent representatives of social democratic parties from Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland, along with MPs, MEPs, chairmen of parliamentary factions, and political scientists. Indeed, POLITYKA’s main office hosted virtually the entire leadership of Poland’s Left: Grzegorz Napieralski, Bartosz Arłukowicz, Leszek Miller, Józef Oleksy, Marek Borowski, Marek Balicki, Danuta Waniek, Tadeusz Iwiński, Jerzy Wiatr, Barbara Labuda, Wojciech Filemonowicz, and many others.

Aleksander Kwaśniewski called attention to the fact that not only the social democrats are experiencing an identity crisis; all across Europe we are witnessing a crisis of the party system. The 20th century’s political constructions have lost their contours, blended together in the political melting-pot, devised similar programs – and especially similar practices. If anything is to distinguish the Left in the early 21st century, it is the pressure for sustainable development (on a global scale, as well), for the state’s axiological neutrality, and for the integration of sundry minority social groups. Martin Schulz [*see the adjacent interview with him*] called upon the Left of all countries to unite together and be bold in their criticism of the present model of capitalism.

Prof. Peter Loesche of the University in Göttingen repeated the quip, “the future is not what it once was”. Quite simply, many of the social democrats’ traditional postulates have either been institutionalized in prosperous European societies (Marek Borowski later spoke more about this), or have been adopted by parties on the Right. Thus, the Left needs to seek a new vision.

Grzegorz Napieralski, the leader of SLD, then presented his vision for his party's program: to create equal possibilities (not only equal opportunities) for access to education and employment, and to introduce in the EU's new countries a charter of basic rights and proven social innovations. Bartosz Arłukowicz challenged the idea of many Leftist activists to concentrate above all on various social groups that experience exclusion and/or discrimination, "because today those being wronged are but niche groups": social democrats must address society as a whole and offer it a vision of better living standards, ones not subordinated to the pressures of productivity and ceaseless growth of GDP.

Marek Borowski, citing sociological research, noted that people today find it difficult to define their own views and to place them on the left-center-right spectrum. Trust in leaders and the credibility of parties is often more important than their program, and social democracy time and again has betrayed that trust. Member of the Bundestag Dietmar Nietan added that credibility can be recovered with returning to the Left's betrayed principles, if only to mention the principle that the state should reach where the market is too unwieldy an instrument – namely, in guaranteeing equal access to the most important public services: health care, education, mass transit, and protection of those with disabilities.

Several of the panelists drew attention to the need to defend the “European social model”, now under threat, and to strengthen EU democracy (deputy chairman of the European Parliament dr. Libor Rouček from the Czech Republic was one of those who spoke about this). It is Europe's socialists who should give impulse to creating a federal system on our continent.

The participants of the debate, which lasted many hours, often defined themselves as either optimists or pessimists when it comes to the future of social democracy. During the final panel the Spanish political scientist dr. Antonio Estella tried to bring them together, and he was continuously asked about the successes and failures of Prime Minister Zapatero, the idol of the radical European Left. In dr Estella's opinion, today's market of ideas in Europe is impoverished and everyone is stealing everyone else's goods. Moreover, the room for maneuver is equally cramped for politicians, who have similar troubles in every country: the economic crisis, budget deficits, and unemployment. Once the crisis ends, exhausted societies will again give social democrats a chance to return to power.

translated by Philip Earl Steele