

Working people, Unite!

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A conversation with **Martin Schulz**, leader of the Socialists in the European Parliament

Martin Schulz (55) is a bookseller by profession. An SPD activist, from its youth organization to the national leadership. In the European Parliament since 1994. In 2012 he is to succeed Poland's Jerzy Buzek as the President of the EP.

ADAM KRZEMIŃSKI: Back in the 80s the philosopher Ralf Dahrendorf forecast the end of social democracy's century. Later came the brief ascent of Blair's New Labour and Schröder's New Center. But isn't European social democracy in retreat today?

MARTIN SCHULZ: It's true. In many EU countries we have lost power. One of our problems concerns the fact that centrist and rightist parties have adopted our rhetoric. Our task for the early 21st century is to persistently highlight the contradictions between the promises and the reality of conservative governments.

That's true that conservatives have stolen your language. Sarkozy likes to quote Marx.

That's a good example. Sarkozy says 'more of the state, more control, less capitalism'. But in practice he implements less of the state, less control, and greater freedoms for capital. There's a big gap between his sales pitch and his daily policy. But we, too, over the past 20 years didn't really stick to the principle of saying only what we truly can do, and doing only what we promised.

Along with the conservatives, the social democrats also succumbed to nationalist populism. In France the boogiemán was the Polish plumber, in Germany it was the Polish tile-layer. Unionist social democrats were greedily defending their position and demanding a blockade on competition from the East.

One small correction. The person using foreigners to strike fear was the co-founder of the Left Party (*Die Linke*, the radical Marxist Left – ed.), Oskar Lafontaine. The leader of CSU Edmund Stoiber spoke about the threat of “Polish tile-layers”. However, the social democrat Franz Müntefering was in fact railing against the locusts of currency speculators devouring up whole countries. But you're right: the social democratic parties also tried to find above all national solutions to supranational economic mechanisms. We had become used to this. But what we should do now is return to the 19th-century founding fathers of social democracy. They created the international social democratic movement on the premise that social security can be won only via international means. That understanding is more relevant today than ever.

Today the point is to prevent that bloated, speculative capitalism from undermining our democracy. This is why we have to impose supranational regulations on it. This will be possible only when at the international level we force through the social democratic idea of

equal share in state and economic resources. Thanks to the internal market of the EU we now have at our disposal the proper tools vis-à-vis producers. But we do not have them in relation to the labor market, however. Wrestling, at the international level, a just share in prosperity is the central idea of European social democracy in the 21st century.

Well, but blood is thicker than water. During Opel's crisis everybody wanted to see the company maintain production and its workplaces in their own country. In 2009 we somehow didn't really see solidarity strikes waged jointly by Belgian, Polish, and German employees of Opel...

That's because we don't have EU strike legislation. And because we don't have a European advisory body for labor that would conduct wage negotiations with big companies. Such the case, it's easy to play the plants in one country off those in another. If strikes were waged everywhere with solidarity, the companies would have a problem.

But if we begin strikes of that kind, producers will thumb their noses at our joint social policy and head off to Asia.

I don't think so. Europe is simply too attractive. Capital is not a deer that spooks at one hungry glare. Europe is half a billion relatively wealthy consumers. It's an attractive market, and one that's not so easy to leave.

But the textile industry and shipbuilding have already gone.

We can square off with the companies that take their production to Asia by introducing appropriate standards in the EU. For example, by refusing to permit products created through the slave labor of children to enter our market. We also have the tools within our international cooperation to defend ourselves against blackmail on the part of supranational concerns.

For that, you have to be in power. And yet last year SPD – after 11 years in power – fell from grace. Here in Poland in 2005 SLD very nearly committed suicide. Both parties had earlier shifted toward neo-liberal concepts and did something for their countries. But then the voters punished them with a vengeance.

Indeed, a year ago we suffered a huge defeat – barely 23%. That's the worst result in the history of the Federal Republic. But today the opinion polls are showing we enjoy 30% – the same as the governing Christian Democrats. People have convinced themselves that Angela Merkel was a good head of government so long as the social democrats kept their eye on her. Now she's running with that strange minister of foreign affairs and people have grasped that her government is good for nothing. In the case of the present federal government you can see that watching their polls paralyzed them.

Our chancellors – Willy Brandt or Helmut Schmidt – acted in accord with the principle 'first the good of the country, then the good of the party'. And they both paid for that. They also

opted not to try and outwait problems, like Helmut Kohl and Angela Merkel, but tackled them. Proof of this is Schmidt's attitude during the oil crisis of 1974 or the terrorist offensives of 1976, the recognition of Poland's border by Brandt, or Schröder's difficult economic reforms and expansion of the EU.

I well remember the pressure we were under in the EU to admit only the Baltic countries and the Czech Republic. But Schröder and Verheugen were uncompromising: no EU expansion without Poland. That was the proper approach. That's why both German and Polish social democrats should have more self-assurance when we speak of Polish-German relations. There's more to the relationship than Angela Merkel and Donald Tusk.

You often speak about the European project of the social democratic party, but in fact the existing parties are splitting into littler ones. In Germany the Left Party arose from the post-GDR PDS party in the new lands and from SPD dissidents in the west. In Poland there are now several spin-offs from social democracy. Is this a serious problem?

SLD has different roots than we do, but it is a party that has proved it accepts the same values we do and bears a similar responsibility. There's no way to compare it with PDS. The very fact that in SLD there are two young leaders battling for the stern, men who had little in common with communist Poland – this proves that SLD has sufficient substance to appeal to the young generation. However, the Left Party is above all a protest party. It enters the government only in the eastern lands. And then its people act like social democrats. But no more than that. The misfortune of that party is the destructive policy of Oskar Lafontaine...

... the former leader of SPD, who in 1999 got mad at Schröder, gathered up his toys...

... and holds to the principle 'the worse things are, the better', because the more discontent and protest...

In that regard he's similar to Jarosław Kaczyński.

Only that in Germany the protest comes from the Left, as the protest on the Right has been historically discredited.

German opinion polls give the two leftist groupings SPD and the Left together with the Greens [see our article on them on p. 60] nearly 60% of potential voters. The trouble is that no such coalition is conceivable.

We are heading toward a red-green government. The liberals from FDP have enormous troubles. In today's Germany the Greens are the true liberal party. It's they, with Claudia Roth and Cem Özdemir¹, who attract the liberal, enlightened middle class more than FDP does.

¹ Mistakenly given in the Polish original as Cem Özdimir (*transl.*)

This might be the beginning of the end of the liberals' party. Last year FDP gained via the disappointment with Angela Merkel. Now those same voters are switching to the Greens.

But isn't the Left Party a problem for SPD? After all, they took several percentage points from you.

According to the polls, together with the Greens and the Left we have 60% support, as you say – but the oscillation we see in the polls doesn't translate to voters' decisions. It's all going to settle down, and to our favor – because the voters know that the only stable coalition is SPD with the Greens, without that additional red condiment. And when SPD forces through its program for greater social justice, it will again attract those who went to the Left Party.

If the Left Party wants to participate in the federal government, it must answer several basic questions regarding Germany's international obligations. The Republic cannot be governed by a party that fails to comprehend that 35% of our GDP derives from export. Besides that, the Left Party is Eurosceptical.

Without acceptance of the social market economy and the EU's internal market, all talk of co-governing the Federal Republic is fanciful. It's not us – they are the ones who have to discuss these matters with each other. They also want to exit NATO, even though the slogans of the 80s, when Lafontaine was young, have long disappeared. But there's no way to make one's youth last forever.

This week the conservative newspapers were in triumph: the choice of Ed Miliband as leader of the Labour Party spells the end of New Labour. Ten years later, what really remains of the famous Blair-Schröder declaration reconciling social democracy and liberal capitalism?

Zilch. That declaration arose in June, 1999 and was never brought into being. Schröder and Blair swiftly parted ways. But if today conservatives are speaking the language of the Left, then we must admit there was a period when the leftist parties were speaking the language of conservatives. That reaped a vengeance. But now it's avenging itself on the Right. That's why I say again: we have to know how to admit that some ideas are old, but not antiquated. On the contrary, they remain modern and useful for today. Like international solidarity.

Aleksander Kwaśniewski calls attention to China. A huge country governed by communists, with the hyper-rich beside millions of the destitute – and arching over that the capstone of Chinese Marxism.

Experience teaches that no such system can function. The monolith of today's Chinese communist party is not an ideological monolith, but an administrative monolith. Its substance is not politics, but administration. That's the gateway to a state deprived of ideas. But in China pragmatism means corruption. I think that's what will cause the downfall of the

Chinese system. After all, they're creating a caste society. China is again on the road to a system of mandarins. Over the past 26 years all the secretary generals came from Shanghai.

Below the surface, things are broiling in China. But we Europeans have no reason to take pleasure in that. It's in our interest for China to be stable. India is also occupied with itself, only that because it's a federal country it can better manage its internal conflicts. Despite all, I believe we should look at Europe optimistically. The social market economy and parliamentary democracy make the best model for the 21st century.

For Russia, as well?

I think the Russians, and the Russian leadership, too, would want eventually to have our European model for economics and democracy.

translated by Philip Earl Steele