

Interview with Bronislaw Geremek published in Le Soir (15 December 1997)

Caption: On 15 December 1997, Bronislaw Geremek, Polish Foreign Minister, grants an interview to the Belgian daily newspaper Le Soir in which he comments on the decisions adopted at the end of the Luxembourg European Council with regard to the forthcoming enlargement of the European Union.

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‘We must not forget that the EU is more than just an economic arrangement’

• What was your gut feeling at this European Summit?

• To me, it seemed like a long-held dream come true for the countries who suffered the division of Europe after the Second World War. That may sound like mere rhetoric, but it isn't. The Solidarity movement in Poland was seeking this opening up, this return to Europe, as early as 1980. The dream can be said to have endured from 13 December 1981, when Poland's hopes were crushed by the imposition of martial law, to 13 December 1997, when its hopes became a reality. This historic dimension must not be overlooked. At the meeting of Foreign Ministers I could see that the feeling of satisfaction was shared not only by the countries in the 'first group' — those with which negotiations will begin very soon — but also by the other candidates. This enlargement is not simply a technical matter; it is the 'end of the division of Europe'. The European Council wanted the decision to be taken in an atmosphere of openness rather than exclusion.

• But aren't you afraid that the existence of two groups — one negotiating first and the other later — will give rise to a new demarcation line?

• I don't think it will, because the 'division' into two separate groups is not based on an arbitrary decision that will give some countries a chance and not others. What is more, the countries concerned by the first decision will be able to help the other candidates. It is in Poland's interest, for example, to support the Baltic states: not only Estonia, but Lithuania and Latvia too. It is also in our interest that Bulgaria and Romania should join us in the negotiation process as soon as possible.

• What adjustments seem to you to be the most difficult?

• We are faced with three major tasks: the restructuring of heavy industry — metallurgy and coal mining —, agriculture, and the decentralisation of the State. These are not short-term reforms. The transformation of agriculture, in particular, will take time: if we look closely at the process that was launched in Portugal and Spain, we can see that it takes 10 or 12 years.

• Your Prime Minister, Mr Buzek, sees 2001, the first year of the third millennium, as the ideal date for Poland's accession. Others are less optimistic. What is your view?

• We should not forget that Poland began the task of adaptation, especially with regard to inflation, some years ago, and that the legal and economic measures taken, and the legislation passed by the Polish Parliament, conform to EU law. The best approach, it seems to me, is a realistic one: negotiations must begin as soon as possible, and enlargement should take place as soon as possible. We should not overestimate the symbolic importance of dates: 2000 must not become a magic figure.

The negotiations will take at least a year and a half, and the ratification process another year and a half. So we can reasonably expect Poland to become a member sometime between 2000 and 2002.

• That would be wonderful, of course ... But many EU citizens fear the social and economic consequences of enlargement. What can you say to set their minds at rest?

• We must realise that such fears exist on both sides. Accession to the EU is causing apprehension in Poland too. As things stand at present, our foreign trade balance with the EU countries is still negative. So there is reason to fear that the EU will benefit more from Polish accession than Poland itself. We do not want to become just an export market for other EU members.

Moreover, we must not forget that the EU is more than just an economic arrangement: it was also created to ensure peace in Europe. And when we see the cost to Europe of conflicts like the wars in Bosnia and other parts of the world, we realise how rational and important this aspect — the construction of peace — really is.

• **What do you think of the Union's lack of financial preparation for enlargement, of the untouchable budget ceiling of 1.27 % of GNP?**

• Spending 1.28 % of GNP on the EU structures, instead of 1.27 %, is not, I think, a problem. Rather, the problem is one of political will, and of finding the context in which decisions can be taken — outside election campaigns, for example. But that raises a question of basic approach: how can we build a Europe that ensures peace without adopting an attitude of solidarity that creates a collective identity which can resist the selfish inclinations of nation states? What we need is to adopt a much broader European attitude now, one that transcends disputes about customs duties on steel or dairy products. We have to ask ourselves why the European Union exists ... And we Poles want a strong Europe.

• **Some European diplomats are irritated by Polish demands for exceptions before negotiations have even started. Will you be adopting an aggressive negotiating stance?**

• I am against aggressive negotiation by either the candidate countries or the Member States, but I can well understand that the negotiations may be detailed and tough. The Polish Government must of course show goodwill in regard to the adjustment process, but it wishes to meet with equal goodwill on the part of the Union. We must prevent the bureaucratic and technical aspect gaining the upper hand — and we have already had the impression that it was doing so — over political will.

Interview by André Riche