

# Transcription of the interview with Bronislaw Geremek (Brussels, 11 June 2008)


**Caption:** Transcription of the interview with Bronislaw Geremek (1932–2008), Polish historian and politician, former member of the Solidarnosc social movement and former Polish Foreign Minister, carried out by the Centre Virtuel de la Connaissance sur l’Europe (CVCE) on 11 June 2008 at the studios of the Council of the European Union in Brussels. The interview was conducted by Serge Thines, an assistant researcher at the CVCE, and particularly focuses on the following subjects: Bronislaw Geremek’s youth and training, the creation and work of Solidarnosc and the peaceful transition in Poland, Poland’s accession to the European Union and the limits and identity of the European Union.

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### Table of Contents

I. Youth and training.....	1
II. The creation and work of Solidarność and the peaceful transition in Poland.....	2
III. Poland's accession to the European Union.....	6
IV. The European Union: limits and identity.....	10

### I. Youth and training

[**Serge Thines**] Professor Geremek, hello and thank you very much for agreeing to give us this interview today, 11 June 2008. We are in the Council's studios in Brussels, and together we are going to be looking back over your long and distinguished European career. It was when you were at university that you first got to know the Marxist literature and decided to join the Polish United Workers' Party in 1950. Why did you opt to go down the Communist road at the beginning of the 1950s?

[**Bronisław Geremek**] Well, your question puts me in mind of what I used to be in my youth. But they also say that what makes a man what he is, is his childhood. What defined me for life was the fact that I was a child of the war. What I mean by a child of the war is that I lived through the beginnings of the Second World War and I was aware of what was going on. I can remember when I was still a child going to a demonstration to welcome France's entry into the war, side by side with Poland. Then there were the actual war years which left their mark on me and which I'll never forget, especially the time I spent in the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw. It made me what I am. And if I go on to think about the causes I got involved in, I think they were defined by my childhood. I wanted to commit to a cause which was on the side of the weak, I thought we needed to do something to change the world. And I was deluded into thinking that the party which would change the world was the one which was in power in Poland. I got to know about it in a literary way more than anything else, curiously enough, through the only newspaper in French I could get my hands on in Poland, which was *Lettres françaises*, the Communist Party's literary newspaper. But that was how I got to know about the movement. I had no political ambitions, in fact I didn't really much care for current affairs. When I went to university, I opted for the history faculty, in other words I wanted to study the past, but I was thinking of the past of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and I thought that the 20<sup>th</sup> century with all its tragedies was a special kind of area. And that was where I found myself faced with the doctrinaire commitment of some of my teachers, when I was asked to put together a presentation of the origins of the Communist International. The first International was set up by Marx and Engels. I did it and my professor told me I didn't feel enough respect for the great founders of Marxist-Leninist ideology. I realised that in that field you suffocated. So I switched to the Middle Ages. The Middle Ages were my second choice, but by choosing it I found myself, as a historian and as a man. In 1956 I came to a Western country for the first time, as the guest of my cousins in France, to continue my studies and do research in the archives. After that, I got a scholarship from Section 6 of the École pratique des hautes études at the Sorbonne and I did my doctoral thesis. So my first approaches were approaches which only involved the world of academia. But at the same time, I

was looking at Paris, the City of Lights, Paris, the city of my literary dreams. I got to know France through literature. I was also trying to learn French, but I learned it in a particular way. I mean I understood the language very well, I was even quite fluent, only it was the language of the 19th-century novel, of 19th-century French literature. When I was confronted with the street slang of Paris, for example, I was lost. So my first encounters were with archives, with the past, with the world of academia. After that I got a university job, I was a lecturer at the University of Paris, at the Sorbonne. I taught a little, I was a young teacher of Polish history and at the same time I was carrying on with research for my doctoral thesis.

**[Serge Thines]** While you were training as a historian, you stayed in France a number of times, particularly in 1956, 1957 and 1962. How did you see Western Europe and the first stirrings of European integration in those days?

**[Bronisław Geremek]** Well, in 1956, you see, I was there at a time of historical change in Poland, where Gomułka, the representative of a school of thought which we didn't call Polish or national any more in the governing party, took power. Then, when I was already in Warsaw, there was the Hungarian Revolution, the violent rejection of the Communist system. And the Treaty of Rome, the fact is that it didn't impinge on my experience, on the life I was leading at the time. It was only later that I made the link between the Treaty of Rome and then the Hungarian revolution as well. The Red Army entering Budapest was one of the spurs, I found out about it through my later research work in European archives. In a sense it was prompted by danger. The entry of the Red Army was a reminder that democracy is not guaranteed when there are undemocratic regimes on European soil. So European integration wasn't at all a concern of mine.

## **II. The creation and work of *Solidarność* and the peaceful transition in Poland**

**[Serge Thines]** In 1956 you joined the revisionist wing of the Polish Communist Party. After the events of 1968, you actively opposed the Polish Communist regime. You were part of the 'flying university', and you helped make sure that the KOR, the body which from 1976 onwards coordinated help for workers prosecuted through the courts, ran smoothly. The dissident trade union movement 'Solidarity' came into being in 1980 out of the events in the Gdańsk shipyards. Can you give us an overview of the social and political situation in Poland at the beginning of the 1980s and tell us how you came to join the 'Solidarity' movement?

**[Bronisław Geremek]** I think a good way to look at what happened in Poland and the way things developed there is against the background of developments in the situation in the eastern bloc, in the Warsaw pact countries. I've told you the Hungarian revolution was an expression of the rejection of the system. When you consider the place these eastern bloc countries occupy in Europe's shared memory, you could see the line as running from 1956 – the Hungarian revolution, violent rejection of the Communist system, then 1968 – the student events in Polish universities, but especially the Prague spring. In 1968, after that violent rejection which was drowned in blood, there was an attempt to give the Communist regime a human face. What I mean is that what was called socialism with a human face was an attempt to reform Communism, to revise the governing ideology. All the various revisionist strands thought they were, so to speak, improving the system. When the Warsaw Pact armies moved into Czech territory – Czechoslovakia – that actually killed that hope that the system could be reformed, could be improved. So I think that the way we experienced it was a sort of accumulation, where we couldn't, we didn't try to do a re-run of a Hungarian-style revolution. But after 1968 it would have been ridiculous even to think that anything could be done inside the Communist Party or that the ideology, the doctrine put out by the system,

could be overhauled. From the 1960s onwards, one of our daily spiritual foods was *samizdats*. What's a *samizdat*? They were typewritten pages brought back by people who were able to go to the Soviet Union and come back to Poland, and they were the wretched, despairing cries of young Russian people, Russian intellectuals, the Russian intelligentsia, and for us it was extremely important to know that it was a shared cause. And then we tried to keep up with what was going on in Czechoslovakia, hoping that it would have consequences for the other countries too. The Polish army took part in the operation to put down the Prague Spring. It was one of the reasons that prompted me too to express my own disagreement, the disagreement felt by many of my friends, but I left the Party at that time. They tried to put me on trial on a charge – since I was an officer in the reserve, students all had to do military service during their studies, so you became an officer in the reserve – an officer in the reserve – and apparently I'd committed an act of treason. They asked the court martial to try my case. In the end, it was all so patently ridiculous in the light of what had happened that it made them think twice about it. After 1968, we tried to get organised, and in Poland there was a whole series of things that happened one after the other. To start with, after 1956 – there was 1956, the seizure of power by Gomułka which I've mentioned – there was an attempt, a student newspaper which was an independent newspaper, not censored. And that newspaper was a rallying point for a movement of young people hoping to be able to do something, to influence the regime. At that time the workers weren't stirring. When there was the persecution directed at the Polish universities, when there was a clean-out of all the teachers in the Polish universities who were seen as Zionists or Jews or revisionists, the social sciences in Poland were impoverished by the loss of a huge number of very great scholars in that field. The universities were under attack, the workers didn't stir in 1968. So in 1970, there were major strikes on the Baltic coast in Gdańsk and Szczecin, the students didn't move either, the young people didn't move, the intelligentsia didn't move at all. It was only in 1976 that people reacted differently, with the suppression of the workers in Radom and Ursus – those are big industrial centres in Poland about 30 and 100 kilometres from Warsaw. Faced with the suppression of the workers, a committee of intellectuals and students set itself up, and that was the factor which brought about change. You could say that those liaison people were what unified the society. And it was 1980 which changed the situation completely, after that revolution in 1956, after that wonderful, peaceful revolution in Prague in 1968, with an attempt to change the system from the inside. In 1980, I would say, the Poles tried to isolate the regime, to push it out of people's day-to-day lives and proclaim the independence of a workers' movement, a trade union movement. But this time, during the strikes in Gdańsk, the peasants came to help the workers by bringing them food and not asking to be paid. The intellectuals came to help the workers. Would you like to know how I myself got involved? In the 1970s we'd had a clandestine university. It was called the flying university, because it used to flit from one apartment to another to escape from the police. But it was a name with a tradition, because back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the Russian occupation, the Polish university used to be called the flying university, for the same reason, in fact. So, on behalf of that society – the university association, where most of the people who used to get involved were representatives of the social sciences, the thinking disciplines, philosophy, history – I went, with my colleague and friend, the future Prime Minister of Poland, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, at the time [a member of the club] of the most important Catholic intellectuals, we went to Gdańsk during the strike bearing a letter from the intellectuals of Warsaw and Cracow. That letter, we also [...], as the signatories had asked, to the government, the Central Committee of the Communist Party. An hour after delivering the letter, I was arrested by the police, there was a long search of my home, and I was released. Two days later, we decided to go to Gdańsk to take the letter to the workers. And the Warsaw we left was like a city under siege, police everywhere, army units by the sides of the roads. And the Gdańsk we arrived in, my friend Mazowiecki and I, was a free city. There was no sign of the police, the only town in Poland where the police were nowhere to be seen. Another thing which was perhaps just as significant is that there were no drunks, and that in the streets of a port city at night. That was another thing that made the time special. Well, we arrived, we saw the chairmen of the strike committees and the leader of the workers' movement in Gdańsk, Lech Wałęsa. He thanked us for the letter and asked us a question

we weren't expecting: 'Can you help us? Because we know what we want, but we're scared, we're afraid the other side, the other people, the ones we may have to talk to, may be able to trick us. Can you help us not to get tricked?' That was how we set up a committee of experts attached to the strike committee, consisting of historians, economists, politicians. This committee consisted of five people. That's how my personal adventure with the *Solidarność* movement first started, my direct involvement in politics, but that is also how the greatest resistance movement in the whole history of eastern Europe first started.

[**Serge Thines**] And did the Solidarity movement have links with your opposition network in eastern Europe, Charter 77 for instance?

[**Bronisław Geremek**] We had very close ties in the 1970s. In the 1970s, there were meetings with my friends on the KOR Committee, the workers' defence committee with Charter 77. On our side, there was Jacek Kuroń, there was Adam Michnik. On the other side, it was Václav Havel, Jiří Dienstbier. But at the time of *Solidarność*, of that great movement of solidarity, the situation was different. During the strike, there were no contacts with the other eastern bloc countries. Straight after, though, we asserted ourselves not as an opposition movement but as a very large workers' trade union with the strength of ten million members behind us. On the other side, just as in Poland before *Solidarność*, there were only small groups of dissidents. What is important, and I know it, I see it with hindsight as we talk now, is that you mustn't forget that at that time, when the strike was on, it wasn't an ordinary strike, it was a strike where the Soviet fleet was a few miles, a few kilometres from the Lenin shipyard. The city, as I've said, the city of Gdańsk was free, but the country was in the hands of the police. And the persecution was severe, the situation was touch-and-go, nobody could possibly know whether there wasn't going to be an immediate military response. And that was when a letter reached us from Romania, from someone who said he was a Romanian worker. What he said was: 'I am proud to see my Polish comrades know how you need to fight for freedom.' It was a moving letter, we read it out to the workers in *Solidarność*. But what we didn't know at the time was that that Romanian worker, after the letter was read out in public in Poland, was arrested in Romania. And sentenced to seven or eight years in prison, which he served. We only found him again a year ago, almost by chance. Historians are sometimes at a loss when they come face to face with the things that happen in real life, even when there are no records, there are always these kinds of surprise events, the fact of a surprise which makes you think of the picture which otherwise, looking at the documents, would be much less dynamic than it was. But you also have to consider the tragic fate of a man who paid almost with his life, because after that he couldn't get a job, he retired. And the fact that if there weren't these chance second meetings, we wouldn't know about it. So there were acts of solidarity. Later on, in eastern Europe, both in Russia, in the Soviet Union, and in the central European countries, you had the feeling that it was a movement – this Polish movement – which defied the imagination with the number of people who belonged to it, its strength, the way it existed openly, that in a way this Polish movement also represented the aspirations of all the other countries.

But the delegations who used to come over at the time, they were mainly delegations from the western countries, from trade unions in Europe and Asia, and especially Japan, American trade unions. We had the feeling that the CFDT, the great French union which was with us from the time, by chance, of the strike in Gdańsk and which was with us later on during the history of that union, was in fact for us the representative of the West. But on 13 December 1981, martial law was imposed by General Jaruzelski and his team.

[**Serge Thines**] I'd like to talk now about the round table and the peaceful transition in Poland. Could you start by telling us how the round table came into being? And then, what were the aims of Solidarity and the Polish Government respectively during the negotiations, and, lastly, what part did



you play during the negotiations?

[**Bronisław Geremek**] The introduction of martial law was an act calculated to kill off Poland's hopes. People sometimes say [that] the defenders of that decision [did it] to prevent the worst happening, in other words, the Soviet army entering the country. I don't think so. An invasion by the Soviet army at that moment, after all the setbacks the Soviet army went through in Afghanistan, that kind of intervention couldn't have happened. At the beginning, after the declaration of martial law, you might have thought they were going to succeed. Because the Army marched in, the Army took power. Every company had its army commissar, a curfew was imposed, ten thousand Solidarity leaders were jailed. You could have thought the movement had been stamped out. What came as a surprise to the other side, the side the people governing our country were on, was that the movement couldn't be stamped out. That it existed under the surface, that it had been setting up structures for years, it had set up the underground press. There was a publication, for instance, called *The Worker* which normally came out every day and had a print run of a hundred thousand copies. A hundred thousand copies, that also means enormous distribution networks and then a readership network much wider than the number of copies. So the government, the Communist Party and also the army, what we used to call the military junta, realised that it was impossible to govern the country. Either you had to launch a campaign of bloody repression, and it was at the time when Gorbachev was promising *perestroika* and *glasnost*, or you had to start negotiating. The government started by trying to get negotiations going with the Church. It used to treat the Church as its political partner. The Polish Catholic Church refused, saying that the only partner which represented society was *Solidarność*. Finally, again in 1988, there was the growing industrial discontent among the workers and other sections of society. There was a major strike in Gdańsk, which was put down and had no support in the country as a whole. Faced with that situation, the post-military government, since by this time, after the state of war, after martial law, it was already the government headed by generals, by the army chief. They realised that they had to look for a negotiable situation. We made a proposal for it at the beginning of 1989. We proposed this anti-recession pact, we used to say: 'We in the underground.' Because at the time, I had had my job taken away from me, I was released when the amnesty was passed in 1987, we proposed an anti-recession pact, saying: 'The country's going through a deep recession, the life and the survival of the nation are at risk, so we need to stop talking politics and make this our watchword: "Let us fight the recession together."' And there was no response to this act of good will. At the end of 1988, after a spectacular victory in a show the Communist Party organised, or so it thought, Lech Wałęsa, who wasn't a politician, who wasn't an educated man, when he found himself standing in front of the public television cameras facing a major political leader who was the head of the official Polish unions, he – as they'd said, we've found the document – would be annihilated. Well, Lech Wałęsa came out on top! And after that discussion between the two representatives – the worker and the apparatchik, one of them who represented Poland and also had the good idea, when he introduced himself on television, of saying: 'Good evening, ladies and gentlemen!', an unexpected human gesture and a human touch – well, after that, the government realised it had to start negotiating. That was how the idea for an approach to negotiations which we had put forward was taken up. The round table was a proposal from the government. Our thinking was that it was a table which couldn't be round because there were two sides and two sides facing each other. On the one hand, there was the military government and on the other there was a movement which could lay claim to represent the society. During the 1980 negotiations, when we were drafting the Gdańsk agreements, my friends and I drew up all the texts the workers were putting forward. This time, we were a team, together with Tadeusz Mazowiecki, and we made the proposals for the topics to be discussed. We thought the most difficult and most important part of the negotiations would be over the legalising of *Solidarność*. In the end, the Jaruzelski government realised that it was a necessary condition. It agreed to the legalisation and that was how we embarked on the political talks on the possible political developments in the country. On our side, we put the emphasis on freedom of the media and freedom of association. Then it was the government which raised the question of elections,

saying that it could allow free elections to only 33% of the seats in Parliament. You could say they even proposed that we do without elections altogether and just appoint people. We asked to have elections. They put up candidates even for the 33% of the seats they proposed to give us, but they didn't win any seats in Parliament out of that 33%. And as for the remaining seats, there were betrayals: the parties which were associated with the Communist Party broke with it. So much for 1989. On 4 June 1989, it was a critical moment in the history of Europe, not just of Poland. For the first time, there was representation for a society which was able to decide on the political future of its country.

**[Serge Thines]** In several interviews, you have said that the transition to democracy in Spain was seen in 1989 as a model for a peaceful transition in Poland. Could you tell us a little more about that?

**[Bronisław Geremek]** It's a subject one could say a lot about. What I would say to you is that I spoke personally to a senior representative of the Polish Church, saying that our dream – this was before the round table in 1986 or 1987 – saying that we needed someone who, like Juan Carlos, could guarantee stability during the transition, stability during the transformation. And who would not let there be any bloodshed. We needed a Juan Carlos. And the reply I got was: 'But the Polish Church can play that role.' And in fact, it did play it then, during the 1980s, firstly through the voice of John-Paul II, the Polish Pope, who, during his first visit to his country of his birth, said: 'Don't be afraid!' Those words were absolutely key to the way the situation developed in the 1980s. After that, we had the idea that the Spanish example was an example, perhaps the only example, of a peaceful revolution on European soil. It's an old idea, from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Italian writers used to talk about the *revoluzione pacifica*. Well, that was a peaceful revolution, and a revolution with no bloodshed. In that sense the Spanish example, in that idea that you can change things profoundly, that you make a dictatorial government stand aside without actually using revolutionary means – for us that was an example that spurred us on, but everything else was different. Spain and Poland in 1980, like Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Romania, were quite different situations, after all. Even so, especially in Poland, we did manage to bring about that transformation, that peaceful transition, without any violence.

### III. Poland's accession to the European Union

**[Serge Thines]** How did you feel when Poland joined the European Union on 1 May 2004? And what impressions have stayed with you from that historic day?

**[Bronisław Geremek]** I had the privilege, firstly as a member of the Polish Parliament after the elections in 1989, chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Constitutional Affairs Committee of the Polish parliament, then as Foreign Minister, of being involved in the negotiations on association and then on Poland's accession. We put a sentence into the text of the association treaty which was very important for us. We expressed our desire of joining the European Union. And all the European Commission could say at the time was that the Commission took note of the fact. But there was no response at the time. 1990-1991 was a period when the European Union hadn't yet worked out a doctrine of enlargement. Then the negotiations started. And in 1999, as my country's Foreign Minister, in the building where we are talking now, I started the official negotiations on Poland's accession to the European Union. And there I was on 1 May 2004 on one of the big squares in Warsaw, Plac Konstytucji, at midnight, with thousands of other people, at the moment when the European flag was flown beside the Polish flag on the flagpole in the square. I was with all those people who were moved, moved to tears – because it was a symbolic moment,

the moment when we rejoined the community of nations, where Poland took its due place. Robert Schuman, the founding father, had said that a place had to be made for those other countries that were not masters of their own fate. The time had come. And if I may look back, look at myself in that square, what I would say is that I have the feeling that sense of excitement was not shared on the other side. What I means is that it was an emotion felt by people in the East, but in the West people didn't see the enlargement as a real act of reunification of Europe. Because it was the moment of reunification, eastern Europe had had a different history for centuries. There was a different economic structure, urbanisation was much less developed, political societies were less developed. It wasn't just a case of "suddenly there was Yalta which pushed us into the arms of the Soviet Union". There were deep-seated historical roots, and then there was also the injustice of the end of the war. We, must not forget that Poland took part in that war, on the right side. The Polish Army fought Nazi Germany on every front in the Second World War. And Poland itself couldn't decide its own fate. So what happened in 2004 was an act of justice. And also Europe was able to reunite. We ought to be able to think that that could have been a time of shared joy, that joy of reunification. The fact that there was not that feeling seems to me to have an influence, firstly that it expresses a certain weakness of the European Community, and secondly that it expresses the weakness in the way developments have unfolded. The European Union is the greatest success of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. If we take stock of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, all we see is the idea of Europe – in the second half, that idea became a reality in the most wonderful way. But it was at that moment, in 2004, the time of the great enlargement, that Europe was asking itself what its identity was, what the values which united it were and what the political dimension was – how to create the political dimension. And then, since we didn't manage to engage with the feelings of people in eastern Europe, the response came in the form of all that talk about Polish plumbers maybe taking French workers' jobs. There was a feeling that it was going to cause problems, that the cake, the cake we all share, was now going to be cut up into smaller pieces. There was an automatic reaction of selfishness, which we mustn't blame Europe's societies for because they were badly informed. When I remember the reactions from Europe's societies to *Solidarność*, when I remember the *Solidarność* badge, which was the expression of solidarity with the 'Solidarity' movement, I used to see in it that feeling and that excitement of European unity. I think the political elites failed to produce books, to put that message of excitement, of satisfaction to public opinion. And what I actually think was the act of unification impinged on the awareness of people in Europe as an act of enlargement where we moved the frontiers. We failed to grasp the global scale of that moment in terms sentiment and ideology. Nor did we realise that it wasn't just the West bringing something to the countries of the East, but that the countries of the East also brought something.

**[Serge Thines]** At the beginning of the 1990s, Poland actively supported the idea of political and economic cooperation in central Europe. That was how the Visegrád Group and the Central European Free Trade Agreement came into being. Did you have a direct hand in the drafting of the two projects?

**[Bronisław Geremek]** Well, I don't want to talk about myself. Since you ask me, I'll say yes. Why did I launch, or why did I and my friends have two ideas which I think were important in the history of those years? Firstly, the Weimar Triangle. The Weimar Triangle, preferential cooperation between France, Germany and Poland. Why have that kind of preferential cooperation? There had to be reconciliation between the Poles and the Germans. It's our great neighbour, a great European Union country, history had separated us. To do that, there had to be a third partner. One whom the Poles saw as a neighbour who shared their feelings, France. So it all started with a thought: 'Well, to reconcile Poland and Germany, what we needed was a lady companion.' France played the part of the lady companion, but there was more to it than that. It was a clever, very important, flexible political instrument which could be used in adapting two sides of the European Union to enlargement and the enlargement countries as regards the European Union, on the model of Poland and other countries. Then the second important political instrument was the Visegrád Group. The



idea for this group arose out of the friendship between Václav Havel and his entourage and our movement. And once free governments had been established in both countries, we thought of launching the idea of cooperation between countries with similar destinies, and by countries with similar destinies we meant Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland. So there's a Weimar triangle and a Visegrád triangle. But in fact, when the decision took on legal form in Visegrád, there were firstly already four countries, since Czechoslovakia no longer existed, there were the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Then we had problems with Slovakia, under the undemocratic rule of a government which did not meet European standards, and I introduced a principle at our meetings whereby there were three partners and one empty chair. The empty chair is the device the French dreamed up for the European Union. It was used in a different way in our case. What did we think of, myself in the first instance, but all my friends as well? We thought of the example and the experience of the Benelux grouping. We thought that that cooperative enterprise which was the basis of the European Union had an enormous role to play, because it was a grouping of three not very large countries linked by obvious cultural ties, with a willingness to cooperate. We wanted to imitate that. Then when I was talking to my Czech and Hungarian friends I used the example of Benelux, saying that such a form of cooperation could survive, could continue within the European Union. We would see how, we would see in what way it might be useful. And I don't think that cooperation lived up to its promises. The Weimar Triangle did. This Visegrád Triangle, which became the Visegrád Group and still exists is not yet playing that cooperation part – enhanced cooperation, indeed, in the European jargon. It could be an example of enhanced cooperation between a few countries – four, five or six countries with a shared destiny and also with certain shared interests. The argument we used to be given regarding the difficulties of that kind of cooperation concerned the fact that our economies did not complement each other. In fact, they were in competition with each other. In the same field as the Hungarians, we have interests which clash. It is sometimes the same with the Czechs and the Slovaks. But despite all that, I think that that type of cooperation, which has taken the form of direct, regular consultation, can take place both at the level of ministers and at the local level, the regional authorities' level, and can still play an important part inside the European Union.

**[Serge Thines]** With Poland's accession to the European Union, a new chapter in your long and splendid political career opened up. In June 2004, you were elected to the European Parliament for the Alliance of Democrats and Liberals for Europe. I'd like to ask you two questions about the way the European Parliament is perceived by the Union's citizens. Firstly, how is the European Parliament perceived by the citizens of central and eastern Europe? And, secondly, do you think the European Parliament is capable of responding to the democratic deficit in the European Union?

**[Bronisław Geremek]** I'm new to the European Parliament, but I have been there for more than three years after all. So I can't contrive to see it with an outsider's eye or look at it from the outside any more. But I used to see it with those eyes at first. And I found it a strange sort of parliament, a parliament which doesn't decide who is to be in the government, a parliament which doesn't take decisions on taxes. What sort of a parliament is it? As a historian, I know it all started with taxation. Representation arose out of problems relating to taxation. So it was a parliament which was a specific kind of body, which didn't correspond to a real parliament. But I became more and more excited to see how this Parliament got used to playing a completely new part, since all Parliament did was talk, knowing perfectly well that the word of the European Parliament didn't become a reality in the other European institutions. But little by little Parliament realised it could have an influence on the composition of the European Commission. The periods of crisis everyone knows about were proof of this. Then, in legislating, Parliament started to take on a much more important role. I think that Parliament now, with the new Treaty – as we speak the fate of the new Treaty is being decided – but I hope that with this treaty the European Parliament will be playing a completely new part. An important part, as it will be one of the key institutions in the structure of Europe. Which it hasn't been up till now. So, being aware of this immense part that Parliament may be playing in the future, I would like to put forward a critical thought, which is also a self-criticism

since I am a member of that institutions, namely that Parliament should get back in touch with Europe's citizens. When elections to the Senate are being held, people want to get elected, they stand, they propose a programme and they try to win the voters over to their side. Well, it's also a time when voters give them their trust. They give some trust on credit. What can you possibly know about a candidate who introduces himself, even for an hour, at a meeting with future voters? That contract of trust should now require the European Parliament to see itself as the standard-bearer for the European spirit. The European Union was put together pragmatically, it was built in a pragmatic way through the willingness of the European Union's great dreamers. There was Jean Monnet, a practical man, the man who proposed the Coal Community in 1943. You can't imagine what a pragmatic impact that made. 1943 – I'm trying to remember. I was just a kid at the time, those were the times when you didn't know how the war was going to end. As for him, he talked, he had his mind on reconciliation between France and Germany. Two enemies – we didn't know which was going to emerge as the winner from all that. Huge determination, but also the hope which went hand in hand with the task of building Europe, now had to be sought out again. I would actually have preferred it for the European Union not to be seen as the work of chief accountants. The European Union ought to make room for the poets of life, the philosophers, the citizens. That's where I see Parliament having a part to play, I would very much like the European Parliament now, in the situation where it is giving itself a new role, where the European Union is also taking on a new dimension, I would like Parliament to be the place where people say forcefully: 'There is not enough room for Europe's citizens in the structure of Europe.' Democracy isn't just elections which have to be held, it isn't just the fact that the majority governs, not the minority. It is also a place for debating questions, it's also a place where people ask who wants to take the floor, who wants to say something. We haven't yet shaped structures for what Jürgen Habermas or Jacques Derrida used to call the public space. Well, it ought to be a public space where we won't be afraid to put questions to the citizen and wait for him to answer. I think that what we're lacking at the moment is, to begin with, a definition of the European citizen where it would be clear that the citizens of Poland or Luxembourg are being given new rights. But I say new because they are becoming European citizens, in other words they have a new capacity. There are new rights and new obligations. And, secondly, I would very much like it to be the concept of the European citizen, that it should be understood as an answer to the question of why we want to live together, all our different nations with different histories. The answer to that lies in the area of the problem of European identity, which looks back to values and to history, through the idea of a shared future and thus a shared project. And the way to an answer also lies in that feeling of attachment to the European spirit which is the genius of this continent. An unhappy continent, a continent which has been through wars, totalitarian regimes, which has been the very symbol of wars and which used to propagate war throughout the world. Well, on this continent, the European Union as an institution of peace and soft power is truly an example to the world.

**[Serge Thines]** Since joining, Poland has been one of the larger Member States of the European Union. What do you think Poland's role is, and what place does it occupy, in this 27- or even 35-member Europe?

**[Bronisław Geremek]** I think Poland has to be a one of the members of a 27- or 35-member European Union, on an equal footing with the others. I mean we don't need to have an inferiority complex, as I think the dynamic way a new country develops, especially on the economic level but also as regards administrative management, proves. So I think people should accept our being on an equal footing in this Community, that we shouldn't have some countries which are equal and others which are more equal. That is our dream. Secondly, we Poles want – and I think the same could be said of all these new countries – I mean the distinction between the new and old countries is gradually going to disappear. The European Union must be effective, it must be capable of putting together policies of solidarity. Solidarity in foreign policy, solidarity with the world's poor, solidarity in energy supply, natural gas or oil, solidarity in the face of danger and climate change. To

do that, it must be a community, but a strong community, with a political dimension, a common foreign policy, not having any problems any more about giving the answer when people ask what the European Union's telephone number is – so that it can give the number straight away and the European Union can speak with a single voice. That's what the Poles dream of. What can the Poles do inside the European Union? I don't think that just because we are a larger country than the other countries which joined the European Union it gives us more power or a greater place. It does, perhaps, give us a job to do. The experience of the post-communist countries joining the European Union must become a positive factor, in the sense that it doesn't lead to any phobias or hostility or hatred for others, even if we've suffered in the course of our history. But it should be an experience of freedom, of a love of freedom. There is no Europe without freedom. If the European Union wasn't a creation of freedom, it wouldn't exist. So we bring that experience; freedom is not a thing, a bird that flies away, but a feature of the everyday reality of public life. Then we also bring a spirit of openness towards the East. It's important because the East is moving. We say 'to the East' – now that Poland is inside the European Union, well, east of Poland there's Russia, Belarus and the Ukraine. But there's also Asia to the east, and Europe cannot respond with silence to the profound shift we are now seeing in the Asian economies, but also in public life in those countries. So I think our joining the Union opens up new prospects without creating any new dangers. And perhaps our countries can play an important part in shaping a European Union policy on the east, a European *Ostpolitik*. We are trying to do it now: the proposal tabled by Sweden and Poland jointly for a European Union policy on the east is an example. If I can answer your question using that example, the answer will be that the new countries confer added value on the European Union; they don't just get something from the immense accomplishments of the European Union, they also bring it experience, determination, education and a love of innovation in thinking which could be useful to Europe. So it will be a pleasure to think that in the accounts given of Europe, the 'European narrative', we could put something into them about this succession of struggles for freedom: the Hungarian revolution, the Prague spring and Poland's *Solidarność*, sharing our common memory – these will be factors which assert our identity and our feelings of internal unity.

#### IV. The European Union: limits and identity

[**Serge Thines**] In the books you have written as a historian, the work of Fernand Braudel, whose disciple you are in a way, is well set out. In his monumental work *Grammaire des civilisations*, Braudel painted a portrait of the world's civilisations. In particular, he singles out a number of civilisations, including European civilisation, Arab-Muslim civilisation and Russian civilisation. This raises the question of how far Europe can go. Should countries like the Ukraine, Russia or Turkey eventually join the European Union?

[**Bronisław Geremek**] I'm glad that you mention the name of a great master of French historiography who was my master, Fernand Braudel, because in his teaching on civilisations I find a way of thinking which remains fresh. When he talks about European civilisation, he says it is made up of various forms of humanism, Catholic humanism, Christian humanism, Protestant humanism, the humanism of the Renaissance, the humanism of the Age of Enlightenment. He teaches us that Europe, without looking for its roots in too complicated a way, has a heritage shaped by the concept of the greatness of the human person, that man is the centre of European thinking. Well, if we apply that to our eastern neighbours, how can there be any doubt that the Ukraine is a European country? It is a country which, as early as the 11<sup>th</sup> century, gave France a queen. The French even chose her: the Princess of Kiev became Queen of France. It's a country which has a history shared not just with Poland but with the whole of Europe. However, its name was expunged from the European memory because the country was incorporated into another empire. The problem

is: 'Should frontiers be fixed?' I myself think each generation sets frontiers, especially since they are not purely geographical frontiers. They are frontiers representing values, frontiers created by historical destiny at the same time. A question we can ask is: 'Can the Mediterranean once again become an internal sea?' Probably not, because another, quite different civilisation has come into being on the other side of the Mediterranean. Or will a day come when the Baltic is the only internal European sea, small though it is? But the real question is whether we should now be closing off the horizons of the European Union, because we citizens of Europe are getting a little tired of enlargements. Tiredness, though, is a bad counsellor. And we shouldn't be turning a momentary tiredness into a philosophy. So what are we to do with Turkey? Well, I think that when we look at that prospect over the long term which Fernand Braudel sets before us, we could say that until 2020 no country, except the Balkan countries, will become a member of the European Union. In other words, we're talking about the next 12 years, and we may even ask ourselves whether Albania will be included in this enlargement taking in the Balkans. Then, looking ahead to 2025, we'll see the question of the Ukraine, which is not yet an applicant for accession, coming up too, as well as Turkey, which has been an applicant to join the European Union since 1999, since the Helsinki summit which I took part in and where I saw the decisions being taken. So it's a future generation which is going to be taking the decision, because the European Union has the right to take the decision on whether to say Yes or No to applications for admission. But do you suppose that that day I mentioned, 1 May 2004, a great day for Europe and not just for the countries coming into the European Union, cannot happen again on other occasions, in situations where Europe will be certain that admitting new Member States cannot weaken it? Because that is the condition expressed in the somewhat bureaucratic language of the Treaties, when they speak of the capacity of absorption, as we now say, the Union's capacity of incorporation. But all that means is that the decision is a political one, that such a decision has to be understood by Europe's societies. In that case, to use Braudel's terms, we can say that the European Union puts into practice the idea of the unity of a civilisation, and of a civilisation which has served the interests of the other civilisations and could, once again, place itself at the service of others.

**[Serge Thines]** Is there a European identity capable of co-existing or even replacing national identity?

**[Bronisław Geremek]** That's the key question, and to that key question I won't venture to give you an answer, because I think we have to keep looking, it must be an ongoing task. It must involve working on the memory. We have no common memory, each of us has an individual memory. Collective memory is the outcome of an education, a choice, a political or ideological orientation. It's a creation. And that identity should not be offered up as a factor for exclusion. We are, we have an identity. We have a right to have an identity, quite naturally, as it's a thing which unites individuals and a people as a whole. Only it must not define itself in terms of exclusion. The easiest thing is to establish an identity in terms of negatives. This kind of thing: we're Europeans, we have eyes like this, when there are other civilisations where the eyes are slightly different. But difference is not the same thing as exclusion. We mustn't conceive of identity as being against others. That's the easiest way out. In the Middle Ages it was natural for the Christian community to define itself in opposition to the Tartars who threatened Europe, or later on the Turks. The idea of the European alliance originated with the Turkish peril. Then you can also say that in the minds of the founding fathers of the European Union, a reference to others was a reference to the communist peril, the totalitarian peril, a danger that would be the destruction of Europe's fundamental values. But I think it's more important to formulate feelings of identity in a positive way. What is important for us Europeans? And as it's a difficult question, I think it should be on the table whenever Europe is being discussed, forever.

**[Serge Thines]** Professor, thank you very much for so kindly giving this interview to CVCE. Thank you.

[Bronisław Geremek] Thank you.