

Ryszard Czarnecki: It certainly is a better and freer Europe - but with serious problems

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Ryszard Czarnecki is a Polish MEP from the European Conservatives and Reformists. He was born in London, UK, in 1963. Czarnecki is a Vice-Chairman of the Delegation to the European Parliament and a member of the Committee on Budgetary Control, Committee on Transport and Tourism. Mr. Czarnecki graduated as a Master of History, University of Wrocław. He worked as an archivist and as a journalist. He also was also a Member of the Parliament of the Republic of Poland in the I and III terms and Minister for European Integration (1997-1999).

Mr. Czarnecki gives exclusive interview on the topic of 20 years after the Fall of Berlin Wall for Europe Gateway.

Where were you and how did you react to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the democratic changes in Poland?

One correction: First there were democratic changes in Poland, and only then, under these influences did the Berlin Wall fall. At the time I was in London and due to the fact that Soviet troops were still stationed in Poland, I was pretty sceptical about this "peaceful revolution". And in fact the changes were very slow.

How did 1989 change you as a person and as a professional journalist? Do you regret for something (anything) from the period before 1989?

It certainly raised the range of freedoms. It was also a career opportunity for young journalists. At the age of 27, I became the secretary editor of an influential monthly periodical, following which I became the assistant chief editor of a national Polish newspaper. At the age of 28, I became the head of a regional periodical. The only thing I do regret is that Communism lasted too long.

You have outstanding professional experience in various fields- you have worked as an archivist, as a journalist, (and also) as a minister. How did your point of view about the 1989 events change, in regard in relation with your various professional commitments and did it change at all?

Previously I was very critical of any forms of compromises with the Communists. Today, I believe that we squandered a great deal of collective energy and enthusiasm and the political class established cut itself off from society. Coming into the Parliament or government a great deal of us did not have much experience.

You were the Minister of European integration in Poland in the late 90's. How has public opinion about the European Union changed in Poland for (in) the past 20 years?

Previously we had a greater deal of scepticism concerning the European Union. Nevertheless even today

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many Poles believe that within the Union we still have to fight our own national interests- as the Germans and the British do.

What are the lessons which the CEE countries and the "old" Member States learned from the transition period after 1989? Can we say that the period of transition is over?

The transitional period will last until the new Union closes the gap that exists between the richer countries the Europe. Generally, there certainly is a consciousness that today's Union is all the while a Union of political and economic interests.

In your opinion, what is it that nourishes the nostalgia for the times of the USSR and the Iron Curtain in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe?

This can be explained by a yearning for the past, where granted there was not a lot of consumer goods, but on the other hand, unemployment was rare and so was the fear of losing a job.

After removing the very last obstacle for the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, how do you expect that the life of the EU citizens would change? Can we speak of a unified Europe?

The Lisbon Treaty in reality ignites interest of the political elite or journalists but not ordinary citizens. It is too soon to speak of a united Europe. Especially since nations of the old "15" sometimes treat the nations of the "new Union" like instruments.

What is Europe's message to the citizens of the Community 20 years after the changes- to the generations who witnessed the transition and to the young people?

Europe is different than it was: you can travel wherever you wish, study where you wish, but you cannot yet work wherever you wish. On the other hand, many people are unemployed- but once were. Many do not have confidence in democratic institutions. It certainly is a better and freer Europe. - but at the same time containing serious problems, flaws and transgressions.