

The Second Bronislaw Geremek Lecture

The Atlantic Council, Washington DC 1 March 2011
HE Mr Radek Sikorski, Foreign Minister of Poland

The Long Road to Democracy

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I want to talk tonight about a long, hard journey. The journey to democracy.

Bronislaw Geremek, after whom this lecture is named, made that journey.

He helped Poland make it. He helped me make it.

Many of you helped us.

Here in Washington D.C. we come together to honour Bronislaw Geremek in these distinguished surroundings.

Thank you all – thank you from the Polish people.

I want to express our national gratitude today to one special American.

A man whose body was imprisoned. A man whose spirit stayed free.

A man who came through that pain, and became a national and international symbol of **integrity** and **principle**.

A symbol of **generosity** – and **reconciliation**.

A man with a life-long commitment to democracy, and unwavering in support for Poland's freedom.

Senator John McCain.

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Time passes. Years go by.

One day you realise that for your children the life you've had is part of history. It's old.

Solidarity, the Gdansk shipyards, martial law, the grace and leadership of Pope John Paul II, the Round Table, the first free elections, President Lech Walesa.

A Polish student, born in a free society in December 1991, today finds it hard to grasp what it was all about: especially General Jaruzelski's scary spectacles

The Polish example recedes into history. But new examples are here before our own eyes.

Belarus. Egypt. Bahrain. Libya.

Countries where people at last have hope. And demand immediate change.

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When you set out on a journey, you need to know where you're starting from. And where you want to go.

You need to know yourself. Who you are. What you stand for.

Bronislaw Geremek looked deep into his own heart to answer those questions.

He was still a boy when his father was murdered in Auschwitz and Stalinists took over Poland.

He joined the Communist Party in 1950, an idealist 18 year-old:

The world had burned before my very eyes ... the existence and power of the Communist Party were inevitable ... I believed it could play a positive role

In 1968 the Soviet Union attacked Czechoslovakia. Bronislaw Geremek changed course. He abandoned communist illusion forever. He worked to build freedom.

He was interned after martial law was declared in 1981. Like John McCain, he kept going.

He helped bring about Poland's free democratic elections in 1991. He became Poland's Foreign Minister.

It is humbling to follow in his footsteps.

Fighting a vicious regime is painful. It may lash out, killing hundreds of people, as Gaddafi has been doing in the last few days.

People must look at themselves:

Do I keep my head down, engage in petty sabotage here and there, hope for better times?

Or do I raise my head? Do I risk all to be free?

People facing this fateful choice need to know that they're not alone -- that they have friends

The United States government and people gave Poland **strong political words**. They backed those words with **strong action**.

- Radio Free Europe. Help to NGOs and trade unionists and journalists.
- Scholarships and training. Help for families of activists in prison.
- Help to the Catholic Church.

We democrats knew whose side you were on. Our side!

Bronislaw Geremek hugely appreciated American generosity.

It was fitting that he spoke for Poland on 12 March 1999 in the Harry Truman Presidential Library in Independence, Missouri.

The day Poland joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation:

The nations, who join this community today, were denied those values until 1989.

On the streets of Budapest in 1956, Prague in 1968 and Gdansk in 1970 and 1981 they paid a heavy price. They have proved their democratic credentials, which give them the right to be here today.

He donated to the Library one of the famous Polish 1989 elections poster featuring Gary Cooper from the movie "High Noon"

He said that that poster had helped Poland join the community of free nations:

For the people of Poland, high noon comes today.

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Back in 1991 when communism ended the world seemed a bright, optimistic place. **High Noon indeed.**

A new era of global cooperation had started. The days of crass collectivist ideology had passed. **History had ended!**

But, as we know, a new uncertainty emerged. Global opinion polls pointed to declining faith in democracy.

Bronislaw Geremek wrote an article wondering where democracy was heading:

Democratic values do not function without citizens; there can be no democracy without democrats.

And I think, he was on to something important.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, Western democracies had two winning arguments.

- democracy is **morally superior** to one-party dictatorship.
- democracy delivers **far better practical outcomes**.

Democracy meant prosperity - dictatorship meant stagnation.

Since then dictatorships and autocracies around the world have learnt the lesson of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

They offer a new option: rising prosperity without democracy.

They liberalise the economy while keeping tight control on political outcomes. So-called “managed democracy”.

Meanwhile the democratic world itself has new problems.

On both sides of the Atlantic there is an uneasy feeling that government is too big, too inflexible.

Instead of Paul Kennedy’s “imperial overstretch” beyond our borders, we have social/economic overstretch at home.

Hence our dilemma.

How to “market” modern pluralism in the Middle East or the developing world, when Russia and China are offering a dynamic but very different alternative?

But that’s not the real issue. Democracies and dictatorships alike have a problem which did not exist in 1991.

Mobile phones and cheap computers give people everywhere a new networking power.

This is why the events in the Middle East are so important.

Elected governments and wicked regimes alike come and go.

Real transformation comes when an old idea crashes against new reality.

Bronislaw Geremek changed course when he saw Soviet tanks crushing Czechoslovakia:

I joined the Party from an illusion, and I left in 1968 when I lost that illusion

That’s what’s happening across the Middle East. Loss of illusion.

We too have lost illusions about the Middle East - illusions of stability.

Many of these regimes have deep roots in Cold War national socialism, which emerged as European colonial rule receded.

All of us – Left, Right, Centre - have ingloriously accepted these decaying, miserable autocracies. Like Bronislaw Geremek's communist party, they looked inevitable.

Better the devil you know. Especially if the devil is rich.

As we have seen in Iraq and Afghanistan, if you topple a devil here or there you can get into serious difficulties

Now, in a matter of days, tens of millions of people have decided to leave their world of illusion. To stop being cheated.

These protestors don't look to Gary Cooper for inspiration.

- **They know what they don't want.**
- **They have yet to discover what they do want.**
- **We can't be sure that they will want what we want.**

These amazing changes in the Middle East have implications for Poland's security. It's the same distance from Krakow to Cairo as it is from Minneapolis to Miami

I'm urgently working with my EU colleagues to work out how best to help.

We are looking for extended stability at a *European Endowment for Democracy*, to help democratic forces in countries, such as Belarus, and regions neighbouring the European Union both South and East.

I support my German colleague Guido Westerwelle's idea of *Transformation Partnerships* with countries from Northern Africa.

Let's also be smart. Let's tie EU support to democratic performance in partner countries.

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From July to December this year, Poland holds the European Union Presidency, for the first time.

These dramatic events will be a huge theme and challenge for our Polish Presidency in the European Union.

But we also have unfinished democracy business in Europe itself.

On Poland's own border Europe has its very own Colonel Gaddafi. Belarus's President Lukashenko

Last year in Krakow I joined Secretary of State Clinton at the 2010 assembly of the Community of Democracies. We gave a warm welcome to the delegation from Belarus.

Since then Belarus has had another phoney election. Guess who won! Lukashenko gave himself another term in office. And I have not met a person who believes in the official result.

Warsaw recently hosted a conference to mobilise support for the pro-democracy cause in Belarus.

Strangely enough President Lukashenko was not grateful. Instead he suggested that my head was infected by swine flu.

Mr Lukashenko. Turn on your TV now and watch what is happening in Libya and you will come to the conclusion that dialogue with the opposition is valuable.

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Events in the Middle East show that we are fast entering a new phase in the spread of democracy, or at least a new pluralism.

- **People living under dictatorships are finding out who they are.**
- **They are realising that the only thing they have to fear is fear itself** [*ref FDR's inaugural address, 1933*]

- **Helping build pluralist societies is back on the agenda.**

We need to help countries where political parties, rule of law, ideas of separation of powers scarcely exist.

Poland has learned the hard way how to move from oppression to freedom.

Free elections are the easy bit. Then comes the slow slog.

Building **democratic institutions** and **democratic practices** -- above all **self-discipline** -- to make democracy work.

There are no short-cuts.

Poland and its people are now six times richer than we were in 1989. A major improvement. But a long way to go before we catch up with countries not held back by communism.

Tunisia, Egypt, Libya are all starting out on that long journey.

One day Belarus, Cuba and North Korea will start too.

We can't tell them what they want. Or try to impose an outcome.

These days that just wouldn't work.

What we can and must do is **offer a principled, generous helping hand.**

- **Poland is ready to lead Europe as an active partner for the United States in exporting the technology of democracy,** wherever it is needed and welcomed
- **Poland today is a country of success - embracing freedom, ready to share it**
- Poland knows about **sequencing key reforms.**

We also know about dismantling oppressive army intelligence structures.

We understand the moral dilemmas in opening up secret police archives.

We know about honest money -- our national position on government debt is one of the strongest in the Western world.

Above all, like Senator McCain we understand the pain of reconciliation between people who were oppressed, and those who did the oppressing

Because reconciliation brings confidence. Reconciliation allows a society to stop looking back at hatred and mistrust, and look to the future instead

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Bronislaw Geremek made his own journey. He knew all about reconciliation.

He would be thrilled at what is happening in the Middle East.

And that Poland is leading the European Union in supporting the people of Belarus, Ukraine and Georgia.

He would not be naïve. He knew that not every popular upheaval has a happy outcome.

But Bronisław Geremek knew that it is **worth taking risks to support freedom and democracy.**

And that when the United States works with Poland and its other friends in Europe to do just that, great things can be achieved.

This is his legacy to us all, the spirit of *Solidarity*

Thank you