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Is it possible to revitalize Europe without external interference and a shift in the geopolitical situation outside the Continent? An answer to this question is here offered by **Prof. Jan Zielonka**, a political scientist analyzing change in Central and Eastern Europe and a lecturer at the European Studies Centre, St. Antony's College, University of Oxford.

ACADEMIA: Poland joined the European Union in May 2004 amid general enthusiasm. Today, however, we can hear many voices of criticism against the EU. How does the overall tally of gains and losses balance out?

JAN ZIELONKA: It is too early for a concrete answer – we've been a member of the EU for a little more than a decade. Even so, there's no doubt the EU has contributed to political stability and economic growth in Poland. Of course, if we were inside the euro zone, the situation in our country would be most probably a lot more complicated as a result of the crisis that chiefly affected the countries that use the common currency. It so happened, however, that the time since our accession to the EU has been a very positive period in the development of independent Poland. Clearly, these interdependencies are complex in their nature, but we certainly can't ignore the issue of membership when analyzing this success.

There has been yet another advantage of accession to the EU, namely the freedom of migration. According to the Migration Observatory, there are 790,000 Poles in England. In most cases, our compatriots are perceived favorably there. Aside from young workers, what else do we have to offer to the EU?

A good example, at the very least. We have demonstrated for many years that it is possible to stimulate exceptionally successful economic growth in economically turbulent periods. A look at the EU statistics reveals that over the past decade Poland's economy has grown by 20-25%, whereas the economies of some other countries, like Greece and Latvia, contracted by 25%. Regardless of how we measure economic development, Poland has been a role model for Europe and let us hope this situation continues. Similarly, we have been viewed favorably as a country that wisely participates in constructive debates on Euro-

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pean issues. Not on every issue, though – we must not forget that the previous government was not very enthusiastic about climate regulations in Europe or collaboration in the field of migration. Unfortunately, we have also showed that a political commotion may suddenly erupt even in a country whose economy is developing so well.

Could Poland play a significant role in the creation of European scientific expertise? For example, what is the position of Polish humanities in the EU?

Many Polish researchers are working abroad. Examples from my field of expertise include Prof. Grzegorz Ekiert, director of the Center for European Studies at Harvard University, Prof. Jan Kubik, director of the School of Slavonic and East European Studies at University College London, and Prof. Leszek Borysiewicz, vice-chancellor of the University of Cambridge. Polish scholars are pursuing some amazingly successful careers in the world. There is a great deal of potential in Poland, too. But science is like soccer: you can do a lot of things without money, but if you want to stay at the top of your game for some time, you need to invest. Science needs not only a lot of money but also modernization – it needs to break free from the Polish culture of feudalism and join the international culture of competition. We have our work cut out for us in this respect.

Are Polish scientific institutions adjusting to European institutions?

As it seems, we are participating in the Bologna Process, we are “Americanizing” ourselves in that we offer subsidies to universities based on certain quality criteria in science, but this is just the beginning. That’s because the purpose is not to carry through formal reforms and obtain funding, but to effect a certain change in academic culture. I find the atmosphere in Polish universities very similar to that in Italy, where assistants carry the briefcases of junior professors, and junior professors carry the briefcases of senior professors. In practice, loyalty to one’s academic patrons, or “barons” as they are called in Italy, is more important than international recognition. That is what we above all need to do away with.

In the years 2009–2013, you implemented the project “Media and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe: Qualities of Democracy, Qualities of Media.” You received a grant of 2 million euros from the European Research Council (ERC) to finance the project. Did you find it easy to obtain such funding? Polish researchers have problems in this respect.

I found it easy, because I knew what needed to be done to apply for such funding. I had successfully completed similar projects in the past. Of course, the fact that I am a professor at the University of Oxford helped, too. In Poland, however, it is sometimes difficult to obtain grants not because we have ideas that are less interesting but because we have no experience in applying for grants or a past record that we can show in the context of European research.

What was specifically your role in the project?

I attempted to understand the relations between the economy, politics, and media. These three worlds are closely related but largely difficult to comprehend. I was especially interested in young democracies, chiefly in Central and Eastern Europe, but not only. Most of the studies analyzing the relationship between media and democracy originates from the liberal Anglo-American tradition, which bears little relation to young democracies with their new ownership structure, unstable politics and volatile economics.

What surprised you most?

When I started that project, I thought chiefly in terms of the relationship between media and politics. However, I quickly realized that media outlets are simply businesses that must earn money. This holds true not only for privately-owned media outlets, which is understandable, but also for many public outlets. For example, this applies to TVP, which derives its income mostly from commercials. Consequently, the border between the private and the public essentially becomes blurred.

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The economic, or even ownership-related, aspect is even more important in countries where the media market is very small – such countries have tiny audiences and economic potential. For example, when we look at ownership relations in the sphere of media in many countries in our region, we can see that Western market players could buy media outlets at low prices after the fall of communism. Back then, those buyers were from such countries as Germany, Sweden, and Austria. They later started to withdraw, especially after the crisis in 2007-2008, and different local buyers replaced them. These new owners used the media for purposes that often differed from their declared objectives. When I talk about the role of media in democracy, I ask, “Who is the owner?” This matters a lot.

Another thing I realized quickly was the fact that the media operate under similar global pressure. I mean especially technological change: the Internet has revolutionized the way we communicate. We must not forget that the Internet became widely accessible two decades ago, which coincided with Poland’s transition to democracy. People are often not aware of the fact that Central and Eastern Europe has experienced not only a geopolitical revolution but a digital revolution as well.

Another significant event was the economic crisis, which affected most countries in the region, some countries in the late 1990s and also later in 2007–2008. Fortunately, however, it didn’t affect Poland to any considerable degree. Of course, the financial crisis was global in its nature, but all global processes manifest

participants involved in the political, economic, and media scene. Additionally, we had a series of meetings and conferences with researchers, not only here in Oxford but also in Warsaw and other cities in Europe. Those were largely in-depth interviews. They brought a picture of the world that differs from the one available online, such as various rankings in terms of the freedom of the media but also the freedom of speech. Clearly, such rankings are a certain indicator, but statistics fail to fully show how this informal and often “dirty” mechanism of mutual interdependencies between media, politics, and the economy works.

What will these relations look like in the context of political change in Poland? Will we witness cooperation or intervention?

In my opinion, the largest factor driving change will be still the Internet, which has already brought most newspapers to the verge of bankruptcy. They have to come up with a new business model, which is not exactly simple. Another issue is that politicians in all countries, especially in our region, are trying to control the public media, sometimes even treat them as their property. But they have a problem, because people “vote with their feet,” so to speak. If public television becomes a propaganda mouthpiece for a political party, the viewers will switch to other media outlets – private networks or the Internet. For example, this has already occurred in Romania, where well below 20 percent of people watch public television.

What are the reasons behind the visible fatigue with the grand idea of the EU, especially on the part of the United Kingdom?

If the EU were such a grand idea, it would not be in a such crisis. We live in a world that is increasingly interconnected in complex ways, and we must find the right method of cooperation or integration in various fields. The whole of the process of European integration has contributed to growing stability in the sphere of security and economic growth in member states, but this positive impact has been difficult to notice in recent years. When we look at the euro zone or the Schengen Area, the Community’s policy is a source of conflict, not collaboration. Instead of resolving problems, the EU often makes feigned moves. In essence, the EU members are currently unable to reach agreement on many issues, and they increasingly act outside the legal framework.

Will the British vote “leave” or “remain” in the EU membership referendum?

I don’t know what choice they will make, especially as many things could still change. The British government has negotiated a disastrous deal with the EU. It has done nothing to help Prime Minister Cameron run the “remain” campaign. He is practically not

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themselves locally. They do so differently, because every country is different in terms of its size, financial resources, and political system. That’s why researchers are talking about glocalism. Such a mixture is interesting in that it looks more global, when you look at it from the top, but local elements become more visible from the bottom. And that leads me to my third observation, which is also linked to what I said about universities: if you only look at the formal organizational structure, you can see very little. You need to look deeper to spot informal interdependencies, especially when we talk about relations between journalists, media owners, and politicians. It takes an anthropologist, not a political scientist, to understand them.

What can be done to analyze them?

We conducted over 300 interviews in different countries in the region. We interviewed all types of partic-



talking about that any more. He has restricted himself to warning British voters. But the thing is the deal opens up plenty of inroads for others to start renegotiating with the EU. I can easily imagine that many affluent countries, such as Germany, will be willing to adopt solutions that limit benefits for workers from Poland or other less affluent countries. In my opinion, that's like opening Pandora's box. But today's EU has bigger problems than Britain and Cameron. Such issues as the euro-zone crisis and the refugee crisis are a lot more dangerous. If the euro zone and the Schengen Area fall apart, it will not matter much if Britain remains in the EU or leaves.

What about the referendum as such? Is that the right way to address the future of the EU? Will the British vote be followed by referendums in other countries?

But we can already see a referendum frenzy. Not so long ago, the Greeks expressed their opinion on bailout conditions in the debt crisis and the Netherlands on Ukraine's association agreement with the EU. We will soon witness a Hungarian referendum on migration quotas. It will not be the last such vote.

I am very skeptical of the idea of holding referendums in general. In my opinion, that's the least intelligent way to arrive at decisions. It reduces complicated issues to a simple "yes" or "no" question, a very simple dichotomy. This fans conflicts, instead of forcing opposing camps to reach agreement. That's because the winner takes it all. Some scholars refer to referendums as a "tyranny of the majority." But in the European

context, referendums are a tyranny of the minority. That is an absurd situation.

Why are we in this situation?

Over those years, the EU has failed to figure out a way to legitimate its actions in a democratic manner. In a sense, democracy in the Community is a fiction: the European Union's legitimacy has been always based not on civic participation but on the effectiveness of action. The trouble is that this method is good when the weather is good. This time, the weather is bad. Apparently, the EU is ineffective in solving the problems around us. It is pushing to attain democratic legitimacy in a forcible manner, but it doesn't know how this should be done. A referendum offers a simple way. But not a very smart one. People are given the opportunity to decide, but only in a superficial way. They decide on matters in one country and their decision entail consequences in other countries. As we know very well from most referendums, populist arguments win out. I believe this is utter madness.

In the face of an economic crisis, an enormous problem posed by emigration, and problems inside the Community, is it possible to turn the tide? Is it possible to revitalize Europe without external interference and a shift in the geopolitical situation outside the Continent?

Of course, it is possible. Why do we teach children at school what mistakes we have made throughout

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history and what mistakes we are making now? Why are we proud of the enlightened tradition of rational thinking? Why do we place emphasis on our noble European values? That is because we are not doomed to fail. However, we must look in the mirror and start living according to the rules that we profess. Today's situation doesn't look good, but I hope that the money the British government spends on your and my salary as teachers at Oxford does not go to waste. Hopefully, we have learned something from the past mistakes, we understand how certain political mechanisms work, and we can make societies in Europe come to see reason, convince them that the best ways to pursue politics involve dialogue and compromise, not battling against everything and everyone.

INTERVIEW BY KAROLINA SHAPLAND

Prof. Jan Zielonka,

a political scientist, studied law at the University of Wrocław and political science at the University of Warsaw. He has lectured at the Dutch universities in Groningen and Leiden and the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence. He has conducted numerous comparative studies of political systems in Eastern and Western Europe. His current work focuses on European integration and disintegration.