

Geremek on Solidarity's Strategy of Restraint in the Spring of 1989

Żakowski: Didn't the rejection of triumphalism, which certainly could find its justification in Solidarity's return to public life, represent a fundamental element of your program at that time? Even today, for people who formed the Solidarity elite, the word "success" only passes their lips with difficulty. Furthermore, it seems to me that this moderation is contagious, that society shares it.

Geremek: This touches on a very essential issue, especially for the entire period from the Round Table talks to our electoral victory. I had the feeling that triumphalism would mean losing touch with reality. . . . After all, our success was unusually fragile. I realized that the scale and the fragility of our success went hand-in-hand. At no time could we provoke the other side, which, while disposing of all of the instruments of violence, agreed to give up so much.

Żakowski: Didn't it seem to you that social mobilization could become an element strengthening the achieved compromise?

Geremek: Let us speak the language of facts. Social mobilization was no doubt necessary, but here we were not talking about mobilization, but about a national uprising.

Żakowski: . . . It still seems to me that at least since the mid-1980s, insurrectionary sentiment in Poland hasn't existed. I was thinking of a kind of social consumption of the success of the Round Table. It seems to me that this was absent. I have the impression that neither the acceptance by the government of talks with representatives of the opposition nor the signing of the Round Table agreement nor the registration of Solidarity were morally or psychologically processed by society or by the political elite. All of these facts slipped somewhere into the mists of everyday Polish reality.

Geremek: I completely agree with you. The conspiratorial elites were hugely distrustful and did not know how to place themselves in the new situation. It demanded changes in their way of life, their mentality, their style of thinking. It was necessary to put forward a philosophy of normalization, of acceptance of compromise; the language of struggle had to give way to the language of politics.

It was an unusually difficult process and it had to continue. Especially because beyond the numerous negotiating teams—well, numerous in the sense of dozens of people, not hundreds of thousands—we were not able to create the hinterlands through which we could spread our experience to society. Something broke in the gears between society and the groups of representatives who spoke with the government. Nonetheless, all of our strength at the Round Table rested precisely on the fact that we spoke the language of society and acted as its representatives. Western means of transferring information, which in 1980 and 1981 played a huge role, this time did not work so clearly to our advantage. Eight years earlier [Westerners] were fascinated by the massive social movement that Solidarity represented. At the time of the Round Table, Western correspondents were fascinated by the behind-the-scenes maneuverings, about

which they necessarily knew less and which by their nature do not arouse great enthusiasm. We were therefore to a great degree deprived of that unusually important translator between us and Polish public opinion. We could not create any other.

Zakowski: Do you not think that Wałęsa's "politics of keeping the lid on" played an essential role in restraining the venting of emotion in society? I remember one of his press conferences at the time of the Second Party Conference. Both he and Jaruzelski issued quite powerful statements directed against opponents working in their own camps. Jaruzelski criticized the party base, and Wałęsa criticized participants in demonstrations and skirmishes with the police. Both sides tried to pull in their own wings, keep emotions to a minimum, keep control of passions.

Geremek: You can only keep a lid on a pot when the water stops boiling. Otherwise, it will explode. The main problem of both sides was therefore replacing an ethos of struggle and animosity with an ethos of civilized politics. . . .

Perhaps it was also caused by the delay in the deliberations, which lasted two months, as the longer they took, the weaker public interest became. In the end, it led to an ambivalent attitude. There was a quite universal consciousness of the weight of what was going on, but doubts also arose as to whether what was achieved on paper would become reality. Who could responsibly say that a new December 13 did not await us and that everything would not start over from the beginning—but in a significantly worse situation. . . .

Zakowski: Did you also have these doubts?

Geremek: Yes, the whole time. I knew well that these games involved scraps of paper, that were, in the end, as defenseless as we were. They could be swept up and thrown in the trash. I fought over what should be written on those scraps of paper, but I never lost my sense of realism. They would not, after all, have been the first scraps of paper in history to be torn up, nor the first ones to be torn up by the communists. I understood the attitude of many people and groups coming out against the Round Table, but I had a different point of view. . . . The strangest irony of history is that the current advocates of the most extreme political programs, the apostles of acceleration and radicalization to a great extent come from those groups that were decisively against our path toward winning Polish independence—the path that allowed us to win that independence very quickly and bloodlessly.

Zakowski: I see there a certain logic based on the belief in the effectiveness, or even the superiority, of violent methods.

Geremek: I would call that Bolshevik logic, because the Bolsheviks most hated precisely those who wanted to achieve goals similar to theirs in a peaceful and democratic way.

Source: Bronisław Geremek, *Rok 1989 -- Geremek odpowiada, Jacek Zakowski pyta* (Warsaw: Plejada 1990), trans. James E. Bjork.