

Lech Wałęsa

President of Poland, 1990–1995 & the Noble Peace Prize Laureate in 1983

## The State of Democracy in Poland and Europe

**Abstract:** The exclusive interview with Mr Lech Wałęsa, the legendary leader of “Solidarity” Trade Union, the Noble Peace Prize Laureate in 1983 and the President of Poland from 1990 to 1995, on the state of democracy in Poland and Europe presents Mr Wałęsa’s perspective on challenges that contemporary political leaders have to face. It discusses four major areas: a historical consideration of Poland’s post-communist transformation, a today’s perspective on democracy in Poland, an evaluation of country’s role in the united Europe and a discussion of processes that threat democracy in Poland and Europe. In the interview, Mr Wałęsa shares his hopes and fears, and he presents main ideas for the new political times. His assessments do not focus only on the today’s state of democracy, but he also tries to consider how the democracy may look like in the future. As a result the *Polish Political Science Yearbook* publishes a unique conversation with the legend of the struggle against Communist dictatorships in Europe that shows Mr Wałęsa’s personal remarks on the democracy, the globalised World and modern technologies.

**Keywords:** *democratisation; transformations; post-communism; Solidarity; the European Union; globalisation; global economy; new technologies*

***Polish Political Science Yearbook:*** *Mr President, can we consider the democratisation of Poland as the finished process or are we still on our road to democracy?*

Lech Wałęsa: The democracy should always be discussed in a perspective of time and space, because different nations understand it differently. Comparing to Europe and the World, we have achieved a lot, but still we have to face other challenges. For years, I was trying to find a general formula to measure the democracy. And the Lech

Wałęsa's definition of democracy includes: the rule of law, the political culture and the wealth of citizens. Each component represents 30% of the state of democracy, while additional 10% is for other factors. Now, we can measure democracy in Poland – in general, the law protects citizen's rights; in the case of political behaviour, the turnout in last election was about 50%, so we should count only half for this component; finally, only 5% citizens of Poland is wealthy enough to not be worried about their future. How we can use this formula? We can identify what needs to be improved – is it the law, the civil society or the economy.

*Has Poland realised all transitional objectives?*

I believe that we have achieved them. Personally, I am satisfied with my political career – I have realised all my dream, plans and most of my projects. I fought for freedom and democracy for the nation. And I delivered it. However, I believed that the democracy will lead itself, I hoped that the elections will enable citizens to choose wisely and to build new Poland. I thought that my role is to lead Poland to freedom and democracy, and then others will govern the nation. Of course, from today's perspective I know that some minor things could be done better. Sometimes I think that I gave every citizen the democracy, a heavy gold bullion, but they did not invest it, they dropped it and broke their feet. Now, they complain on Wałęsa because, he gave them the bullion that they were not able to bear. Yet, when we consider the lack of elites that were murdered during the Second World War and through the communist times, we can see the nation had no teachers to learn how to deal with the democracy. That is the reason why we experience problems with our political regime. Moreover, we live in the globalised World that has changed a perspective – modern technologies cannot be closed in one country, it is the reality of new type of dependencies. And we need to find our place in this World.

*Is contemporary Poland meeting expectations of the founders of Polish democracy?*

My objective was to achieve the freedom for the nation. But, when I learned how Polish democracy works, I decided to run for the presidency to protect our freedom and national interests. Unfortunately, I planned my work for two terms as the president – during the first one, I hoped to start a debate on the democracy in Poland, while in the second one, I wanted to introduce the results of these deliberations. The problem is I was not re-elected in 1995. Thus, I am only half-satisfied, as I realised only a half of my political plans. Still, Poland is a democratic country, a developing economy and an active member of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, so I am convinced that it meets our expectations or even it has achieved more than we dreamed of in 1980s.

*On the other hand, was Polish government able to avoid some mistakes?*

I do not see some major mistakes in the Polish democratisation. Of course, we could organise the new order differently. After the victory over communism I suggested to divide the “Solidarity” into political parties, because the “Solidarity’s” objective was to overthrow the communist dictatorship and to lead Poland towards the freedom. I was afraid of the “Solidarity’s” monopoly. But it was also a symbol of our victory, so it was hard to destroy it. Our objective was the democracy. I was not interested in new dictatorship – Lech Wałęsa had to lose, and the democracy had to win. It was the only possible way.

The idea behind the “Solidarity” was very simple. If you are not able to face with the challenge on your own, you should ask other to help you. In 1980s the challenge was the Soviet Union and the communist regime in Poland. We had to re-organise the World around us to overthrow the dictatorship. When we won, we started building the democracy, but – as I emphasised – every political monopoly is dangerous, including the “Solidarity’s” monopoly. The pluralism was the solution. I knew that I could not be a leader of all parties, but I also knew that Lech Wałęsa’s monopoly was a threat to the Polish democracy.

*Mr President, how do you see the future of democratic Poland?*

My generation experienced great transformation of the World. Now, our country is a part of Europe, even more, it is a part of the globalised economy. My times were the times of a word, but our words have become our reality. And now we stand on the edge of new times, that has to be built by a new generation. Some people looks for a cure in the radicalism, we can observe it in Poland, France or in the United States, because we do not have proper ideas for these new times. Nation-states are the anachronism in times of modern technologies. We need new framework. I have suggested to write a civic decalogue for all nations, a constitution for the modern world. But there a fundamental question: what about the economy? For sure, not the communism, but how we should organise the capitalist order? We cannot agree for the uncontrolled rat race. So, we need to reinvent the capitalism. Even, in the United States, I have heard complains ‘We do not want this economy, we do not want this democracy’ – and I am afraid, because it sound like the call for a global revolution. But when I spend some time with these activist, I noticed that they are not against the free market or the private property, they simply do not like how the capitalist economy works in practice – but not in general, they do not like a piece of its ideology. I am sure that we can fix it. Yet, we need to face new challenges – the activists say ‘We are well-educated and well-trained, but we cannot find a proper

job. Why a government is not able to give us a proper job?'. I think that the solution is limitation of state's involvement in the economy; the labour issue should be addressed by entrepreneurs, they know how to organise it and governments should support them and expect that they will create enough positions for educated and trained citizens. Is there any other solution? Because if not the capitalism, there is only the communism, and the nationalisation of property, the ineffectiveness and the collapse of global economy...

The economy is a key to understand our future. I have always asked myself, why they build so big factories? Only small business can guarantee the lasting stability in democracies. We need to change the way how we think about the ownership – I say, if you have problem with strike, sell 50% of shares to your employees and they will work even harder. These are some ideas we can work with. But we should also change politics. Firstly, it is necessary to eliminate a phenomenon of professional politicians – one or two terms and go back to your work, after few years you can be elected once again. Secondly, we should rethink the election threshold. Thirdly, we need a financial clarity – a citizen should be allowed to track every euro, every dollar or every zloty, and a citizen should know how politicians are spending his money. We need the discussion. We need new debates. The new times requires new ideas, and that is – I believe – the future of democratic Poland.

*Mr President, Poland is a member of the European Union and the NATO, is there any reason to worry about the future of Polish democracy?*

I offered you the formula to measure the democracy. It also helps to identify threats to its stability. I think that the most dangerous are ignorance and foolishness. We need more wisdom and more wealth to avoid ignorant and foolish ideas. I am afraid that current government may move Poland to some right-wing extremism, but I also believe that our society will not agree for these changes. The times have changed. We are no longer a poor society with an undeveloped political culture; now, people are afraid of extremism and they expect from a government one thing – the stability.

*Is the conflict between the government and the Constitutional Court a sign of troubles in Polish democracy?*

It is the question. I consider Mr Jarosław Kaczyński and his associates as my political students. They have seen how the Constitutional Court can block actions of the government. And they try to limit its role in Polish political system. I have always been supporting democratic solutions, as the President I cooperated with the Parliament and the judiciary. Both, I and Mr Kaczyński, we believe in the strong executive. But

my way was democratic one, while Mr Kaczyński is trying to destroy, conquer and subordinate other branches of the government. I understand that the independent Constitutional Court is a challenge for every government, but we need to protect the Constitution and the rule of law.

*Are Poles ready to protect the democracy as hardly as the “Solidarity” fought for it?*

Today, they are not. Today, it would result with a violent conflict – a bloodshed like the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. We need to wait for the proper timing. Soon, this populism and this humbug will no longer be effective. There will be no money to pay for populist programs, and the people will notice that we need a real change, so, they will support progressive political parties, not some right-wing extremists. How long it may take? Probably more than a year. For this period Mr Kaczyński can govern Poland from a back seat.

*Mr President, do you think that Polish democracy needs to be changed?*

I have published my ideas on the Facebook. I travel through Poland and I encourage citizens to organise themselves, to cooperate and to be ready to win back our country. This is what we need to do know. I am ready to stand in this battle and to lead Poles once again. We can change Polish democracy. There are thousands of young and educated people who know better how to improve our country. If they will want me as their leader, I will serve them with pleasure.

*What is your role in the changed Polish democracy?*

There is no role for me. I can be a leader for a very short time, to take a responsibility for punishing those who act against Polish democracy. But I had my time as a political leader. I enjoy my retirement.

*Thus, is your role being Polish Nelson Mandela, the teacher of democracy?*

Maybe. Yet, I think that everyone has to learn democracy on their own. I am the father of eight children and I observed how they made mistakes – I warned them, but still all of them made their mistakes. I see democracy in the same way. You need to experience it, you need to pass your civic exams on your own. Nobody can teach you how be a citizen of the democratic country.

*Mr President, the democratisation of Poland is connected with the integration with the West, what is – in your opinion – the place of Poland in today’s united Europe?*

We should define this place on our own as the nation. We should stop thinking only about our national interests. The united Europe is not the rat race. Once I discussed

with the German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and he asked me why a German taxpayer should pay for supporting Polish, Czech or Hungarian development. And I answered him: ‘Mr Chancellor, in the past times you had to be careful because Poland could buy some cannons and attack your country. But now we live in the new era, where your investments in Poland or the Czech Republic will return quickly – your euros will give jobs for people who will buy German products, who will drive German cars. However, if they do not have their jobs and salaries, they will not buy your products, they will not pay taxes and they may even think about some revolution. Today, the capital does not have nationality – I do not care if my products are bought by Poles, Germans or Americans. I want to make profits. These are different times, this is the new era’.

We need structures to organise this cooperation. And these is the reason why the European Union is so important. For years I state, that if the European Union will be destroyed, Germany, France and Italy will create the new organisation as soon as possible. And if you do not want to be its member, that is your choice. The new Union may be even better than the old one.

*Mr President, but what is Poland's place in this new Europe?*

Years ago, I said, that when Poland will be free, we will integrate with the Western Europe. But what is our place in Europe? Unfortunately, we cannot change that Poland is not a top tourist destination, and we cannot agree to be some Europe's heritage park or a wildlife park. Yet, we are placed in the centre of our continent, and it is our blessing. We can link the West and the East, we can link Berlin with Moscow. Poland's future is trade, transport and communication. In the new times, our geopolitical location is our hope for development.

*On the other hand, how Poland can contribute to the united Europe?*

Poland's place between Germany and Russia was our curse for centuries, but the era of wars has ended and it is our blessing. We are in the middle of Europe – it is the place where everything is closer, more comfortable and less expensive. However, we need the infrastructure. Let me take an example of Polish highways – now, we build them with two lanes for each directions. But it is only enough for today. In the close future we will need three, four or more lanes. Is not it stupid? We should make plans considering not the today but next decades.

We, Europeans are leaving the era of wars, conflicts and foul play, but we still are not able to trust each other. As a results, in Brussels there are thousands of bureaucrats that control if everything is fair. But it is the question of trust. When we will learn that there is no crooked dealings and there are real benefits of this cooperation, we

will reduce the bureaucracy. Yet, the first stage of transition to politics of trust is hard for all European nations. And Poland should show that we trust others and that we want to build Europe based on cooperation.

*Is it possible to build this Europe of trust after the Brexit?*

In the times of change there are some fears and resentments. We had the Christianity in Europe – we have rejected it. Then there were the communism, the liberalism and other ideologies. Now, we have nothing. We have only material goods. And we should invent new groundworks for Europe. But what kind of groundworks? Some people would say ‘liberties and the free market economy’, others that we should build Europe on values. Well, but which values? Firstly, we should agree how we understand being European, than we can change these words into actions.

*Do you believe that Europe can establish one understanding of the democracy?*

We should discuss it. Now, we are between different political eras. The one has not ended yet, the second still has not begun. These are harsh times to leave, but – on the other hand – these are good times to become a hero. What means the Left today? What means the Right today? These are old categories. The Left is more rightist, the Right is more leftist. Everything is mixed. That is why we need new definitions, and new generations has to solve these problems and reorganise our understanding. How to achieve it? Thanks to discussions.

*Mr President, the democracy requires stability to grow, is the democracy threatened by a fear of terrorism?*

No. However, 20 years ago I stated that the new political reality should result with the new organisation of the World. We live in the globalised World, and the United Nations should work on global issues and global solutions. The UN was organised in different times, now we need something new. People in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century should proclaim, that we will never accept antisemitism, racialism, intolerance, ethic cleansings, wars, political violence and terrorism. But wars and the terrorism are useful for some politicians. The is the case of Middle East. Both sides do not want to end this conflict. They pretend that they want a peace. I have been there and I said that they can end it in one month, but both sides have to follow same rules. They have never invited me again, because they do not want solutions. Therefore, these are issues that we should solve globally.

*What about a risk of new authoritarianism in Europe?*

I think that authoritarian regimes in Europe are no longer possible. We have technolo-

gies, the Internet, smartphones. The pro-authoritarian party can win one elections, but it will not be able to change the regime. Protest can be organised really quickly. However, I think how many lessons we, Europeans have to learn before we will understand that authoritarian regimes are not smart choices? How many unnecessary losses and damages we have to experience before we will understand that the democracy is a wise choice? These are questions that bothers me.

*How we can protect the democracy from all these threats?*

The past era it was the times of force. It was the times of wars and conflicts. Now, we live in the era of knowledge, information and globalised economy – so, every smart person will forget about old measures. There is nuclear weapon that can kill the life on the Earth ten times. Maybe even eleven times, I heard. We are in the situation that we have weapons, but we are afraid that we will be attacked and – at the same time – we are afraid to use our armaments because it can destroy the whole planet and kill us all. This is a paradox of contemporary security. As a result, we are too developed to continue wars. We have no other choice than to cooperate and choose wisely. But it is hard to change our habits – we are still prisoners of our resentments, we still use arguments that some German murdered our father or grandfather. The new thinking has to emerge, but – as I said – it requires reorganisation of ideas, and the reorganisation requires discussions. We should talk with each other, always when we have an opportunity to do so.

*Are new technologies more a guard of democracy or a new threat to its stability?*

I believe that future generations will not have to work at all. Everything will be automatized. There will not be a rat race, there will be only fun and pleasure. However, we cannot achieve it through wars or conflicts. To realise this vision we need to change our mentality, ideas and concepts. Maybe in few years, we will learn that it is not healthy to live in one place for the whole life, and that we should live only five years in Poland and then ten years in other country. The God gave us the whole World. Yet, firstly, we need to transform our economic and political systems to make these changes possible. There can be a platform to check where you can leave and work – someone will migrate from Poland, someone will migrate to Poland. We need new standards. We need to understand that this process has started. Closing borders is not a solution, there is no place for isolated countries like Cuba under Mr Fidel Castro's rule. The new times are beginning. We enter them with dreams, and we have to do a lot to realise them. We live too short to not follow them. And this is Lech Wałęsa's message for young generations – change the World around you and design your future.



*Mr President, thank you for the conversation.*

Thank you.

Authorised Interview by Dr Patryk Wawrzyński & Dr Adam Marszałek.

Cooperation: Ms Daria Ostrowska & Professor Joanna Muszkowska-Penson MD.

**Author**

Mr Lech Wałęsa

President of Poland, 1990–1995 & the Noble Peace Prize Laureate in 1983. Contact details:  
pl. Solidarności 1, 80–863 Gdańsk, Poland; e-mail: [blw@ilw.org.pl](mailto:blw@ilw.org.pl).