

'Brussels Was Naïve'

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Ex Polish Leader on Failed Ukraine Talks

Interview By Jan Puhl and Christian Neef

Aleksander Kwasniewski led talks with Ukraine for an association agreement with the EU that collapsed last month. In an interview, he criticizes officials in Brussels for underestimating Russia's intentions and the Ukrainian president for ignoring his own people.

Aleksander Kwasniewski, 59, meets with us in his Warsaw office just as he is preparing to leave on a trip to Brussels. He was Poland's president for 10 years, from 1995 to 2005, during which he led his country into NATO and the European Union. Now he has negotiated with Ukraine on behalf of the EU. Together with former European Parliament President Pat Cox, Kwasniewski's mission was to prepare Europe's second-largest country for an association agreement with Brussels. Hundreds of thousands of protesters have blocked downtown Kiev since the Ukrainian leadership backed away from the agreement at the end of November. When Kwasniewski said that Ukraine's pro-European contingent would not be left alone, Moscow accused him of inciting the opposition to stage a coup.

SPIEGEL: Visiting Kiev these days is like experiencing a sense of déjà-vu. Once again, it's December, there are tens of thousands in the streets and there are protests on the Maidan, Kiev's Independence Square, just as there were during the Orange Revolution in 2004. Why isn't Ukraine making any progress?

Kwasniewski: I too was in Kiev in 2004, and I've been there 27 times in the last few months. And I too am experiencing a sense of déjà-vu. The Ukrainians have missed many opportunities in those nine years. Instead of implementing reforms and building closer ties with Europe, then-President Viktor Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko squandered a lot of energy on internal battles. Then Viktor Yanukovich came to power, and that too led to no fundamental reforms in the direction of democracy and in restructuring the economy. That's why society is disappointed and deeply divided.

SPIEGEL: The issue in 2004 was election fraud, which allegedly helped Yanukovich come into office. This time, however, the problems revolve around geopolitics. Moscow and the pro-Russian community in Ukraine viewed the association agreement with the EU as a declaration of war.

Kwasniewski: The situation is more difficult this time than it was in 2004. Now Yanukovich has a legal mandate as president, and the government has a legitimate parliamentary majority. But Ukrainians are divided over the question of whether the country should form closer ties with the EU. A majority is in favor of closer ties, 15 to 20 percent support a union with Russia and the rest have no opinion. The decision that Yanukovich made shortly before the EU summit in Vilnius, namely to rebuff Brussels, came as a surprise. He didn't explain it to his people, and he apparently believed that it wouldn't make that much difference to the public.

SPIEGEL: And yet nothing less than the future course of Ukraine was at stake.

Kwasniewski: That's why there are now such divergent reactions. The people in Sevastopol want Russia to intervene militarily, because the majority of the population on the Crimean Peninsula is Russian. And then there are places like Lviv, the most pro-European city in Ukraine, where the mayor no longer wants to submit to the central government's authority. After 22 years of independence, and after all the frustrations, the question of whether Kiev will turn toward Russia or the EU is anything but abstract, especially for young people.

SPIEGEL: The government accuses the pro-European demonstrators on the Maidan of preparing a coup. It wouldn't take much for the situation there to escalate.

Kwasniewski: Now that the no-confidence vote against the government has failed, it's possible that the protesters will lose their momentum. That, in turn, could be a signal to law enforcement to use force.

SPIEGEL: How would the EU react?

Kwasniewski: It has to convince both sides to forego violence, and to push for talks between the government and the opposition. It has to say that the door to the EU remains open, including the possibility of returning to the negotiating table. Experts need to discuss how best to help Ukraine financially. And, last but not least, the EU must make it clear that the kind of pressure Russia has recently applied is unacceptable.

SPIEGEL: Did Brussels truly believe that Russia would quietly look on as the EU signed an agreement with Ukraine that was described as "historic," one that ties Kiev more closely to the West?

Kwasniewski: I still remember a speech Yanukovich gave to the parliament, in which he said that integration with Europe was a priority, and that modernizing the economy was only possible in close collaboration with Europe. With the exception of the communists, he had the support of all parties in the parliament at the time. And there is no reason not to believe those statements. But then there was suddenly a radical change of opinion.

SPIEGEL: Because Russia got tough and refused to allow Ukrainian goods in the country? It was a reaction that the EU apparently didn't expect.

Kwasniewski: Yes, Brussels was naïve. From Putin's perspective, Ukraine is an important factor, perhaps the most important one of all. He can't achieve his goal of creating his own Euro-Asian union without Ukraine. The West underestimates Russia's determination, but it also underestimates what is happening in Kiev.

SPIEGEL: You and Pat Cox spent the last few weeks in constant meetings with Yanukovich. How was that?

Kwasniewski: We met with the president 20 times, as well as with the government and the opposition, and we even visited Yulia Tymoshenko. We spoke with Yanukovich for at least 50 hours altogether. We pushed for liberalization of electoral law and the judiciary, as well as a reform of the public prosecutor's office, which still operates on the basis of the Soviet model. And we managed to secure the release of three of the most prominent political prisoners: the former ministers of defense, the interior and the environment.

SPIEGEL: Did you see that as a sign that Yanukovich was serious about the EU?

Kwasniewski: He seemed to be truly serious. But the mood changed in the summer, when the Russians began blocking Ukrainian exports. Many lawmakers with ties to companies began applying more pressure on the ruling party. These are companies that sell products to the Russian market, so they begged

Yanukovich and his party for help. They said that they were out of money and that people were losing their jobs. That was when Putin's meetings with Yanukovich began, and soon they became longer and longer.

SPIEGEL: What sort of a man is Yanukovich? Many say that he isn't very sophisticated intellectually.

Kwasniewski: Yanukovich knows his way around Ukrainian politics very well, in good times and bad. After his defeat in the 2004 election, he didn't succumb to depression but in fact managed to stage a comeback in 2010. He is a tough man and a tough politician. His experiences have made him a suspicious person. Communication isn't his strength. He's more of a technocrat. And his family has gained a lot of influence.

SPIEGEL: Does he have a political vision?

Kwasniewski: I would have said yes until recently. But in the last few days, I've realized that the Ukrainian leadership has no strategy, and that it only sees things in the short term, so as to survive the next few months. That's why it didn't anticipate the public's reaction, which it believes is not spontaneous but is in fact being organized from abroad.

SPIEGEL: Did Yanukovich use the EU to boost his profile with Putin, who had humiliated him so often? And to demand more money?

Kwasniewski: Of course he tried to exploit our talks to get more out of Russia, to tell the Russians: Look, Europe wants us, so you'll have to up the ante. That's how Ukrainian politicians have thought for the last 22 years. The balancing act between the West and the East has created a vacuum. That's why the economy is in such poor shape today, it's why no one trusts the state and it's why millions of people are emigrating. The Ukrainians don't like to hear it, but we Poles are a good example of how the path to the West can be worth it. We had about the same per capita income as Ukraine 20 years ago. Today it's three times as high.

SPIEGEL: Did the EU believe that if it convinced Yanukovich to implement a few liberal laws, Kiev could no longer be knocked off its course toward the West?

Kwasniewski: Ukraine is not an ideal country, nor will it be one for a long time to come. But we have the opportunity to introduce it to our standards. If we don't do that, Kiev will follow the Russian and the Belarusian model. Ukraine was strongly under Russia's influence for centuries, and its people experienced a very brutal form of communism. There are plenty of historical and geopolitical features and conflicts. Only a European strategy will help Ukraine emerge from the crisis. Fortunately, the country has a very lively civil society, which wants to be in the EU.

SPIEGEL: The EU seems pretty naïve in its dealings with the East. The West helped write the new constitution in Russia, and yet sentences are still pronounced by telephone. In Belarus, the EU agreed to a reasonably fair presidential election with (President Alexander) Lukashenko, and then the opposition leaders were arrested on the evening of the election.

Kwasniewski: We have a different mentality. Democracy is an intrinsic value in the West, but in the East power is the key value. Leaders in the East say: We will apply democracy if it serves our needs. If not, we will use a different method.

'We Have To Pursue a Common Policy Toward Russia'

SPIEGEL: Why did the EU make the release of Yulia Tymoshenko a condition?

Kwasniewski: Cox and I were asked to find a solution to the case, so that the association agreement

could be signed. It could also have been a partial pardon, and a reduction of her prison term to two years. Then Yanukovych himself proposed allowing her to leave the country for medical treatment. But his supporters wanted her to serve the full sentence.

SPIEGEL: Was it a mistake to insist on her release? It meant a loss of face for Yanukovych.

Kwasniewski: From today's perspective, perhaps. At an earlier point, it might have been possible to convince them to allow Tymoshenko to leave the country for an operation. Yanukovych wouldn't have lost face, but he would have demonstrated that he is capable of a humanitarian gesture. After all, it was a question of medical treatment and not Tymoshenko's rehabilitation. Continuing to keep her imprisoned is far more costly, politically speaking.

SPIEGEL: The other problem that seemed unsolvable at the end was the money. The 610 million (\$836 million) in aid that the EU was offering was a ridiculous sum. Ukraine is in a deep financial crisis.

Kwasniewski: Yes, Ukraine needs help as quickly as possible. There were talks with the International Monetary Fund, but it set very strict conditions. For instance, the IMF wanted Ukraine to raise natural gas prices, which are highly subsidized. That's political suicide, shortly before elections. The EU could have thought about short-term aid and asked for more lenient solutions from the IMF. That, unfortunately, is only happening now.

SPIEGEL: Meanwhile, Moscow is offering the Ukrainians several billion euros.

Kwasniewski: No such promise is specifically on the table yet. Ukraine is still paying the highest price in Europe for Russian gas.

SPIEGEL: Was Russia's threat to drive Ukraine into national bankruptcy if it signed the association agreement a bluff?

Kwasniewski: I'm afraid it was real.

SPIEGEL: Then the EU should have acted more consistently. Didn't it take the association agreement seriously enough?

Kwasniewski: No, everyone really wanted it. The main weakness of this document is that there is no mention of the prospects of membership, because not everyone in Europe agrees on the issue.

SPIEGEL: Why does the EU need a country that's a patchwork rug with enormous social differences, and where there is no uniform national interest? We've already regretted the accession of Romania and Bulgaria.

Kwasniewski: Solidarity is the foundation of Europe. If we question that, we don't stand a chance. We in Europe know all too well where national egotism can lead. We should stick to the plan to bring the Eastern countries into the orbit of our values.

SPIEGEL: Vladimir Putin is celebrating one triumph over the West after another: Snowden, Syria and now Ukraine. He sees the West as a paper tiger, especially the EU. How will we ever be able to reestablish a normal dialogue with Russia?

Kwasniewski: The successes strengthen Putin's position in the short term, but they also hinder the necessary reforms. Russia needs modernization, economically, socially and institutionally. And it can hardly achieve that without the West. But Putin has to perceive Europe as a partner to be taken seriously. After all, the EU isn't an episode in history, like the Soviet Union. We have to solve our internal problems and pursue a common policy toward Russia. At the moment, we don't have one at all.

SPIEGEL: Mr. Kwasniewski, we thank you for this interview.

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