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*PROF. HENRYK
SKARŻYŃSKI*

THE WINNER OF THE PLEBISCITE
BY THE MINISTRY OF SCIENCE
AND HIGHER EDUCATION

“SCIENCE IS FREEDOM”

NAUKA TO WOLNOŚĆ

25 lat
polskiej
demokracji

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I can see huge progress

Prof. Henryk Skarżyński won the "People of Freedom" award in the science category. "The People of Freedom have been selected - just as in the elections of June 4, 1989 - by the Poles to represent Polish successes in different areas," said President Bronisław Komorowski at a gala to celebrating the results of the "People of Freedom", poll by the TVN television station and the "Gazeta Wyborcza" daily. "Thank you very much for scientists being among the prominent people who have used their chance to be where we want to be, do what we can, and show what we can. I think that many people made the most of it and will be a good symbol of Poland in the world. Thank you to everyone who has voted for us all operating in the area of science, because this proves that we have all managed to do a lot," said Prof. Skarżyński. In an interview with the "Słyszę" bimonthly, he answers questions on how he evaluates the results of the changes in Poland over the past 25 years.

PM Is freedom essential for science?

Yes. The lack of freedom can inhibit progress, research development, and finally ruin what has been achieved. It is no accident that I recalled the names of two great doctors during the gala. At the end of the 19th century, Franciszek Ksawery Jawdyński performed in Warsaw cancer operations like no one else in the world. However, at that time, Warsaw was a provincial city of Tsarist Russia. Dr. Jawdyński did not make it to break through, and today few remember him. After World War II, Prof. Jan Miodoński performed in Kraków otosurgery operations that few doctors carried out in the world at that time. However, he could not announce the results at the right time - he did not get a passport and did not go to the world congress in Amsterdam. Many our outstanding compatriots were in a similar situation, whereas we were able - for the last 25 years - to work and show the world what we can do. I think a lot of scientists took advantage of this opportunity. When I look at what occurred globally in science and medicine in the past 25 years, I can see huge progress.

PM What did freedom mean for you in 1989, and what does it mean now? Your activity within one country proved insufficient, or such are the requirements of the times?

It is best illustrated by facts. It was only in 1989 that I could go to Paris to make myself familiar with the latest treatments for deafness to - as of 1992 - put them into practice in Poland. I have just come back from Australia, from the World Congress of Audiology, which I attended as a scientist and physician who had

developed and implemented his own method for treating partial deafness and used it in the treatment of many patients. I am back with the right to organize such a congress for the first time in Poland, after successful rivalry with the U.S., China and Japan.

PM And how do you feel as a winner of the "People of Freedom" poll?

It is still only getting to me that I have been named the Man of Freedom. What happened is surely for me an opportunity for reflection and sum-ups - what we have managed to achieve in our country in the past 25 years and what we have not. Poles have a tendency to complain. I hope that many people thanks to this poll will start to evaluate more positively the past 25 years, seeing not only mistakes, but also strong points.

PM What does this sum-up look like from your point of view? What fields were we successful in?

Our biggest success was joining the European Union. This step has radically changed our situation, and our thinking. Poles opened up to the world, are successful in various spheres of life, they can compete and win. Never in history have Poles been - in the scientific and medical world, which are closest to my heart - as visible as in the past quarter century. In many medical fields we have caught up with Western Europe, and sometimes we have even overtaken the world, making Poles the first and so far only ones to have access to the latest treatment methods.

We have joined the European Union, and a stream of money followed. The question remains whether we used them really well. Did the EU subsidies translate, everywhere or in most cases, into a new quality and new jobs? How many new local roads were built, and in how many places old roads were only covered with a new layer of asphalt, the result being the same holes as before?

Today, it is crucial to make best use of the current - and probably the last - EU funds available to us without being envious with those who know how to multiply them, without suspecting everyone and everywhere of not complying with the rules, often vague and imprecisely described.

PM And failures?

What I consider as a failure in the last 25 years is the loss of human capital, especially the most active and enterprising part of the young generation of Poles. The fact that today they live in other countries and make careers there is not a problem in itself. The worst thing is that there is no idea how to use their experience gained abroad for the benefit of our country.

Another failure is the lack of a well thought-out strategy of educating young people. Vocational education was done away with too hastily, because humanities are today not effective in terms of prospective jobs. The results of such a move are fatal. We used to have, for example, thousands of nurses - graduates of medical high schools. Now, after higher studies, they are incomparably fewer and only a small portion of them seeks a job in Poland.

PM Indeed, young people often feel lost in the Polish reality. What advice would you give them?

We should learn in order to beat the competition, work to gain experience, use new solutions without reinventing the wheel, communicate well with the environment, because it is a skill that has a decisive influence on the development of a civil society, operate effectively without giving up one's individuality. One should also remember that they have a family, which usually supports them.

PM For 25 years, subsequent governments have been unable to solve problems in health care. Do you have any good idea in this respect for today?

Currently, in the crucial area, which is health care, the private sector occupies a significant position when it comes to using public funds. So why would well-organized public-private teams be not able to do the same? We keep fearing it, and it is an inevitable process. It is impossible to maintain - as if by force - both juggernaut hospitals, not allowing on the market well-organized but highly specialized medical units.

PM And in other sectors? What would you do differently?

When traveling around the country, I watch with great regret underserved rural areas. I think that instead of selling hundreds of thousands of hectares of land, we could have partially enfranchise those who lived there, cultivated fields, gathered crops for years. There was nothing stopping the government from granting part of the shares of the former state-owned farms to farmers employed there. Many regions would not be so desolate now, young people would start families there. Today, they will not come back there. Yet, some deserted regions can be revitalized. It is enough to improve the road network to make them easily accessible. For example, Warsaw could revive the Warmia and Mazury if getting there took no more than half an hour.

PM Speaking of sum-ups, we also usually asks for the future plans. How would you draw the outlook for Poland and Poles for the next 25 years?

Exactly! Our weakness is the lack of real future planning. In many areas, we live from one day to another. Meanwhile, with no real plans for the years 2020, 2030, 2040, we - or rather our children and grandchildren - will have to pay an incredibly high price. No one will remember then which party ruled, and



which was in opposition. Today, we think far too little about the future. We do not argue about how our country will be like, but about arguments and prejudices, often insignificant.

Such discussions seem to be particularly barren if you take into account that Poland is going to become part of a multiracial Europe. As in any community, there will be those who lead, and those led. There will probably be fewer of us in Poland, but Poles will be more present in Europe, and it is a capital that should be used!

There is no reason for us to make minimalist plans. We should think about playing the leading role in the next quarter century. If we prepare for this role, we will be successful. Such was my thinking when I came up with the idea of the World Hearing Center. "What on Earth is the purpose of that swank idea?" I often heard behind my back. I answered then: in order to beat the competition and continue to grow rapidly. If we manage to create it, it will always be the FIRST World Hearing Center, though not the only one because, with the passing of time, similar facilities will appear elsewhere in the world too. After all, if something works well, others start to follow the model. In time, they may even create something better. You need to take this into account - that is what social development is about after all!

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