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#PolskaFree25: celebrating freedom that changed Europe

Twenty five years ago, Poles voted communist authoritarianism out of power in the elections of 4 June 1989, and momentous changes swept through Central and Eastern Europe. To mark this occasion, the international Lech Wałęsa Solidarity Prize will be awarded for the first time in Warsaw on 3 June.



"No freedom without Solidarity"—this was the cry known to everyone in Poland 25 years ago. As a result of negotiations between the democratic opposition—linked to the "Solidarity" Independent Self-governing Trade Union, led by Lech Wałęsa—and the communist authorities, which were held at the Round Table and concluded in April 1989, the two sides agreed to organise Poland's first pluralistic parliamentary elections after the Second World War. The agreement stipulated free elections to the Senate (upper chamber of Parliament).

However, in elections to the Sejm (lower chamber of parliament), the opposition could contest only 35% of the seats available, with the remaining 65% guaranteed for the communists and their allies. Despite the restrictions, the election of 4 June 1989 ended in a clear victory for the opposition movement represented by the Citizens' Committee with Lech Wałęsa. It won 99% of the seats in the Senate and all of the available seats in the Sejm. On that day the Polish people choose freedom, and the communists lost their power.

"This date symbolises our victory over totalitarianism. After forty years of communist rule, Poland was an economically and politically bankrupt country," recalls Minister Radosław Sikorski. "We used to be a source of Europe's worries. Today we're helping to solve problems in the European Union and beyond. We have proved that with perseverance the course of history can be changed.

The June parliamentary elections became a breakthrough point in Poland's political transition, which had been set in motion also by the strikes between 1970 and 1980, rising popular support for Solidarity, the martial law declared in December 1981, and a catastrophic condition of the economy run by communists. The election results also provided great momentum for democratic transition in Poland.

On 12 September 1989, after a failed attempt to form a government by the communists, the Sejm appointed a cabinet led by Tadeusz Mazowiecki, who became the first non-communist prime minister in Central and Eastern Europe after the Second World War. Leszek Balcerowicz, the architect of economic reforms regarded to be the foundations for Poland's successful transformation, became the deputy prime minister and the minister of finance. The Berlin Wall fell on 9 November 1989.

Poland's fully free parliamentary elections were held in autumn 1991. Eight years later, the country acceded to the North Atlantic Alliance, and in 2004 to the European Union.

Celebrating Poland's three happy anniversaries falling in 2014: 25 years of freedom, 15 years of NATO membership and 10 years in the European Union, Polish citizens bear in mind those who are still struggling for change in their countries. We are also sharing our democratic transition experiences. For this reason Radosław Sikorski, Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, has come up with the idea of the Lech Wałęsa Solidarity Prize.

"The Solidarity Prize should recall that Poland was where everything began, that it was Poland's Solidarity which started to tear down walls that eventually tumbled down," emphasised Minister Sikorski at the laureate announcement ceremony in May.

The first laureate- Mustafa Dzhemilev, leader of the Crimean Tatar Movement—will receive it from the hands of President Bronislaw Komorowski in Warsaw on 3 June. The ceremony will be attended by Lech Wałęsa, former President and Solidarity's famous leader, and many distinguished guests.

"For years, Mr Dzhemilev has been an active campaigner for democracy and civil liberties in Ukraine, particularly on behalf of the Tatar community. He bore witness to his democratic beliefs back in the Soviet times, when his was a dissident who was sentenced to some ten years in forced labour camps," said Minister Sikorski announcing the laureate.

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