

Jerzy Buzek: Horatio Alger as EU Parliament President?

Horatio Alger, Jr. was born in the US in the early 1830's and lived until the end of the century--through the Civil War, and therefore through dramatically changing times.

He was a much read author of fiction, in particular of children's stories, the majority of which deftly skirted the horrors of battle and a critical economic shift from agricultural lifeways to urban and industrial economies. In contrast, his emphasis was placed on "rags to riches" tales that depicted a rise from poor beginnings to wealthy status based on character, effort, and hard work.

This focus was not an unlikely offering from the son of a restrained Unitarian minister. However, the theme associated with the Protestant "work ethic" ultimately spilled over into the consciousness of members of all faiths; it ended up figuring prominently in American political campaigns where a quest for votes among participants in an upwardly mobile society still seems incomplete without reference to personal struggles and their almost preordained successes. If Horatio's Alger's tales are themselves receding, they have nonetheless become an integral part of US politics and their living cultural history.

Many in the European media avidly follow the travels and campaign styles of US presidents. However, it is difficult to embed the first Chair of the European Parliament from a formerly Communist country in the cultural construction of autobiographies that are now customary across the Atlantic. Jerzy Buzek, a former Polish Prime Minister from the Solidarity Movement(1997-2001), spent a great deal of time before and after this position as an academic, a professor of chemical engineering. He is of the Protestant faith in a nation of 38, million Catholics, and his scholarly research episodes were often punctuated by trips to Poland's lake district for his favorite hobby, kayaking. Indeed, geography appears to swirl around, rather than completely root, President Buzek in any notably definable place for the sake of either a local or a national electoral constituency.

His birthplace in 1940, a southern region of Poland, belonged at first to Czechoslovakia, thereafter came under Nazi control, and then reverted to the Czechoslovakian government after the close of World War II. His family moved to Silesia, an industrial mining center noted for its multi-ethnic, multi-lingual population, and an area in which he became interested in his academic field and a desire to study abroad for a year at Cambridge University.

His years with Solidarity included activities hidden from the Communist military, work on its victory in 1989, and election to parliament on the movement's base in 1997. Premiership brought conflicting, controversial policies about social security, regional and local governments, along with pension and health care provisions. Corruption in the ranks returned the ex-Communist left to power and Buzek himself returned to academic life. He took with him negotiating skills, a moderating ideology, and a desire to continue in politics. In 2004 he was elected to the European Parliament, seen as able to substantively and symbolically unite various parliamentary factions as well as to bring together fading concepts of the EU's old and new states, or east and west divisions.

Just as the EU is enlarging, so, too, is the office of the Parliament's presidency which now increasingly combines a need for parliamentary skills and a wider vision. The next 2 1/2 years will entail coping with the pushes and pulls of expanding membership. There will also be changing energy sources and reliabilities as Russia and Germany begin the Nordstream pipeline, a potential shift in US foreign policy relative to both the EU and its eastern EU allies, and lingering questions of regional activism: where to serve best as a bloc, and where to stress underlying, often historic, bilateral ties.

President Buzek assumes his new post happily, focused on the current mission and challenging forecast. The only mention of his past is a reference to Silesia, with little in between. "I prefer to be working" at the top, in Belgium and in France, he said, rather than "working at a mine face."

Derived from: Cienski, Jan. "The New Head Of The European Parliament Remade His Political Career On The Eu Stage. Global Post Online, July 18, 2009; "European Parliament's Buzek: Polish Master Of Compromise." EUBusiness Online. July 14, 2009. European Parliament: "Buzek and Trichet At The European Parliament; Crisis Is Not Over." Press Release, from Economic and Monetary Affairs. September 9, 2009. Cienski, Jan. "The Decline of America and Poland's Special Relationship." Global Post Online, September 10, 2009.