

Transcript of a chat session with Madam Grażyna Staniszevska, A Member of the European Parliament

Bemep_mod: Welcome, everyone, to the chat session with Madam Grażyna Staniszevska, a Member of the European Parliament.

G_Staniszevska: Greetings to all the Game participants, I'm very pleased that you're here.

G_Staniszevska: I'd like to begin with a few words about myself: I represent the Silesian Voivodship, for 12 years I was a Member of Sejm, and for 3 years a Senator. I am a member of the Democratic Party, and before that of the Liberty Union. In the European Parliament, I represent the ALDE group. I sit on the Committee on Regional Development and am a stand-in for a member of the Committee on Culture and Education. I also work in the Delegation on EU-Ukraine relations.

Wojadam: I wanted to ask you what the typical day of a MEP looks like.

G_Staniszevska: We begin work at 9 a.m., or even half an hour earlier (to avoid traffic jams), and finish at about 9 p.m. At 9 a.m. the plenary sessions commence (in Strasbourg), or the Committee or political group meetings. In the meantime we have various meetings (mainly with lobbyists – either organizations or individuals). We also receive a lot of e-mails and phones from Poland – mainly asking for comments. Then it is time to get the latest news from the country – mainly via the Internet and TV.

Wojadam: How often do you work in the Committees?

G_Staniszevska: The meetings themselves take place twice a month, and each lasts for 2 days, but you have to suitably prepare yourself for each meeting in advance, in Brussels, as well as earlier, in Poland, during expert inspections and meetings.

Kasiasz: Good day. Since you're a member of the Committee on Culture and Education, I wanted to ask about the current projects and topics that are being currently discussed.

Ewa_s: I'd like to know, what is the Committee on Culture and Education working on now?

G_Staniszevska: One of the most important directives currently on our agenda is related to television – it is a project called “Television without frontiers”. It is an important issue brought on by the development of the Internet and its influence on the market and media – and currently we are working on it in the Committee.

M_ch_wawa: Do you think there is a Silesian nationality?

G_Staniszevska: I think there is no such thing. I come from the southern part of the Voivodship and people there find such statements very annoying – we consider ourselves to be Polish.

Question from dominikus: Do you support the oneseat-eu initiative – that is permanently moving the seat of the EP to Brussels? Wouldn't you miss Strasbourg?

G_Staniszevska: Of course I support it – I wouldn't miss Strasbourg. Driving to Strasbourg is very costly and bothersome – both for the MEPs, and for the EP employees. I even participated in an Internet vote on that proposal.

Question from kokoania: How are the Polish MEPs perceived by their colleagues from the “old Union”?

G_Staniszevska: It is a dynamic, fluid situation – it depends on the situation in our country. If there are certain “excesses” taking place in Poland, then we too are perceived differently. During the Ukrainian Orange Revolution, we were in a way “setting the pace” for the entire European Union – unfortunately that moment has passed.

Zuzia: Do you think that the Polish image abroad has suffered during the last year?

G_Staniszevska: Unfortunately, yes. It makes our work in the EP very difficult – regardless of the political option we support, we are still perceived as the ones hailing from “that weird country”.

Kasiasz: Do you think it would be prudent to consider creating a... IV pillar within the Union – “Culture, Media, Education”?

G_Staniszevska: If the Member States consent – why not ☺ Until now culture and education, as well as tradition, were considered to be national issues, and Brussels was to have no say in them.

Foitek: I know that between 1997 and 2001, you chaired the Sejm Committee on Education, Science and Youth, initiating, among many others, the Interklasa project. Is the development and education of youth still one of your concerns? And if so, do you have an idea how we could encourage the young generation to be active, aware citizens?

G_Staniszevska: I’m still interested in the subject – to which my presence in the EP Committee can attest. I am also still the coordinator of the Interklasa project. It is my opinion that the best way to activate young people is to have them be self-sufficient and perform various tasks – within a group, which has to be created. It is possible to do that at school, although it’s difficult given the current overabundance of memory-based material they have to absorb.

Wojadam: I heard about the directive regarding cheaper cellular phone connections within the same mobile network, in the entire Europe. Can that be achieved – cellularity without frontiers?

G_Staniszevska: I certainly hope so. The MEPs themselves are very interested in the subject due to high roaming costs – we all have personal experiences in this matter and are all rather determined to see it through.

Question from dominikus: What do you consider to be your biggest success in the EP to date?

G_Staniszevska: The Orange Revolution – which united all Poles. All of us spoke in the EP with one voice. It was a great success for Poland and Poles – our involvement in Ukraine.

Wojadam: do you think Ukraine has any chance of joining the EU in the future? If so, what timeframe would you propose? 20 years?

Homer88: How do you think Poland and Poles could help Ukraine after the Orange Revolution?

G_Staniszevska: I think Ukraine has a chance of joining the EU, although it has to compose itself internally first. The Orange Revolution was something akin to the Polish Solidarność movement – when we were fighting against something, we were united, then – we started arguing. Currently it’s difficult to tell from the outside, what Ukraine really expects – does it want to join the EU, or just the opposite. The Ukrainians themselves have to decide first, what it is that they really want. Poles should keep doing what they’re doing – and our government is doing it admirably – which is: supporting Ukraine. Our Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared Ukraine to be our priority and new projects and programs directed towards that country keep springing up. That’s why we should support Ukraine regardless of who is in charge there – however it’s important that their government be elected democratically.

Homer88: What’s your opinion of the Ukrainian media? Are they indeed independent?

G_Staniszevska: I travel to Ukraine very often, and there is a tremendous difference in what information you can currently find in the Ukrainian media, and what could have been found there before the Orange Revolution. Of course it's a change for the better.

Wojadam: Returning to Ukraine for a moment – what were the comments in Brussels following Janukowycz's declaration that Ukraine decided to forego NATO for the moment?

G_Staniszevska: Complete disorientation. It's the same with the current information about the changes in the government (the removal of Minister Tarasiuk – the advocate of the European perspective - from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), it has caused much dismay in Brussels.

Zuzia: We were talking about Ukraine, but how do you see the future of Belarus and the potential role of Poland in that country?

G_Staniszevska: That is a much more difficult situation – the Belarussian government doesn't allow MEPs inside the country at all. I recently made it to Grodno, but I wasn't overly active in my work for the democratization of Belarus before – I think that as long as the government there doesn't change, we can't seriously consider a European future for that country. The role of Poland and the European Union is to support all the forces working for the democratization of Belarus. So if the Belarussian government suddenly joined that effort, we should support it as well – the rest has to be settled by the Belarussians themselves. In the EP we try, as far as our limited resources allow us, to prepare a cadre for Ukraine or Belarus, which could aid in the Europeization process in the future – I employ a Ukrainian girl, and, for example MEP Onyszkiewicz – a Belarussian, who was expelled from his country.

Wojadam: Do you think that the projects organized for Belarussians don't have the desired effect? These teachers can't even organize a European club at school, because Lukaszenko won't allow the "Union vermin" to spread...

G_Staniszevska: I think the bans only appear when you strike the "political note". If we cooperate on a social, hobby-related basis – we shouldn't have that many problems. Even arousing interest for other countries and cooperation is a significant element of democratization.

Wojadam: Besides, Belarus seems to be a paradise compared to the situation in the Caucasus region. Will the EP involve itself with the situation in, for example, Georgia?

G_Staniszevska: Georgia isn't an immediate neighbor of the EU – however the EU and EP want to maintain good relations with all countries. In November, the President of Georgia was a honorary guest at the EP – which is a sign of appreciation – and was received very well, despite the efforts of Russian diplomacy to prevent this.

Question from conservare: You were elected from the Silesian Voivodship – can you tell me what you are doing (parliamentary questions, amendments) in the EP to help in restructuring the Polish mining sector?

G_Staniszevska: The restructuring of the Polish mining sector is a task of the Polish government, not the European Union. We strive to have the European regional development funds also contain means for, among other things, actions such as the restructuring of the Polish mining sector. In the EP we have to take care for our demands to be in concert with those of other nations. For the rules of, for example, spending funds, to solve not only Polish, but also Spanish, French, or German problems – only then do we have a chance to convince others... We have prepared such amendments to the spending rules for 2007-13 and recently to the VII Framework Program.

Wojadam: Since you're interested in education – what do you think about Giertych's plans ("Zero tolerance")?

G_Staniszevska: I don't like it – of course I don't condone aggression at school, but I also do not support the methods proposed by Minister Giertych – as a teacher I know that they won't work. We can't be sending people off to ghettos or criminal schools – we have, after all, the educational duty – we have to encourage teachers to work with difficult students.

Ewa_s: What are your plans/ambitions for the rest of your term?

G_Staniszevska: I would like to actively spend the second half of my term, which begins in January, on the same Committees. In Poland, I would like to see the construction of a bike lane along the Vistula river to its end – at this point it is finished in the Silesian Voivodship, where the Vistula spring is located.

M_ch_wawa: We all have our share of successes and failures. What is your greatest success for Poland? Some specific action?

G_Staniszevska: That's a big topic. We are the first group of Poles in the EP – we feel like we're the pioneers, the greeting card of our country. We try our best for Poland not to be harmed by our actions. Our group is very active – we submit a lot of small ideas, which become parts of larger initiatives. Each idea is constantly being negotiated and transformed – but that's just how Europe works – it requires negotiations and hard work. I think that trailblazing for future MEPs is our most important task at the moment.

Wojadam: How do you intend to greet your colleagues from Bulgaria and Romania?

G_Staniszevska: First of all – they're already there, the current observers will change their status to full MEPs. They will be able to take part in votes. The enlargement of the EU is a great joy for Poles. At first our Western colleagues were apprehensive, thinking that the Union will become more difficult to manage, and now the number of languages is being increased (starting from 1st January there will be 23 official EU languages – with the addition of not only Bulgarian and Romanian, but Gaelic as well).

M_ch_wawa: I understand that it is a very responsible task – to represent Poland, to play the first fiddle. Was there any idea that you felt particularly strongly about? One that you managed to make part of a "greater initiative"?

G_Staniszevska: I don't want to repeat myself, but I suppose it would be the issue of Ukraine. Apart from that, as I work in the regional policy field, I was able to secure (though not at the first attempt) for the new Member States an easier way of spending funds during the transition period.

Andrzej_Banski: How would you rate the legislative codecision procedure? Should it become the main legislative method for the EU?

G_Staniszevska: I think it's very good. As of now the national governments have much more to say in the EU than the representatives of the citizens – i.e. the EP. Through the codecision procedure we reach a compromise between the voice of the societies, and the governments of the Member States. I would like to see it become the basis of the EU, but first comes the grueling, time-consuming process of obtaining the consent of governments, which are not too eager to cede their rights to the EP, as this prolongs the decision-making process.

Question from kokoania: Are there many differences of opinion within the factions? If so, are they serious, or slight divergences? Do the ideological criteria really take precedence over nationality?

G_Staniszevska: Nationality prevails. The differences between French and Dutch liberals are enormous. It could be most vividly witnessed during works on the services directive – all Poles, regardless of their faction, were very liberal, and all Frenchmen – very hermetic and reluctant.

Zuzia: How is your cooperation with Polish MEPs belonging to different EP factions?

G_Staniszevska: Very good. Once a month there is an informal Polish club meeting in Strasbourg, and (up till now) we have always been able to reach a compromise – but only on economic issues. As far as one’s outlook (regarding, for example, the constitution) or ideology is concerned, we are unfortunately split down the middle. But because we’re well aware of that, we avoid all controversial subjects during the club’s meetings – we think that our ability to reach an agreement among ourselves is a great advantage and we would like it to remain so in the future. So that we can agree despite our differences.

_paragrafix: How widespread in the EP is the discussion about the BeMEP game? Are mainly Polish MEPs talking about it?

G_Staniszevska: I’ve only heard Polish MEPs discuss this subject.

Question from dominikus: What prerequisites would you expect from potential candidates for your assistants? Are there any internships for students, or perhaps regular employment options (part-time or fulltime)? Do you require familiarity with French?

G_Staniszevska: English and French are equally important in the EU – without knowing French it’s really difficult to function here. All my assistants are learning and perfecting it. We don’t have any internships at this point – due to office space shortages. In the EP you mainly work at the computer so you need space and hardware.

Zuzia: What foreign languages do you use in the EP?

G_Staniszevska: Mainly English, I’m also learning Ukrainian.

Wojadam: What means of transport do you use to get to Brussels?

G_Staniszevska: The plane – it’s the fastest way to get there.

Zuzia: Have you ever considered joining the newest “trend” and starting your own political weblog?

G_Staniszevska: I admire those who write blogs – it must require a lot of time, I don’t think I’m ready for that yet.

Zuzia: What do you think about the idea of “Europe of Regions”? Do you think it could replace the concept of “Europe of national states” in the future?

G_Staniszevska: I don’t think so – I think the national bonds are too strong (which I find even slightly surprising).

Question from kokoania: Is there any sense of kinship between members of factions hailing from different countries?

G_Staniszevska: The national bonds are the strongest – especially since the MEPs consult their governments – regardless of political beliefs. The political divisions transcending the national ones are only just being constructed – and with great difficulty. The EU is still at the beginning of its journey – it is not, as it may sometimes seem, a monolith – the outcome of the referendum in France can attest to that.

M_ch_wawa: Have you experienced any signs of support in the recent days regarding the issue of Polish meat exported into Russia, or the Polish veto? How is our stand perceived by the MEPs? Is there really solidarity within the EU?

Andrzej_Banski: How did the Polish-Russian “meat” issue and our veto in the negotiations with Russia influence the perception of Poland in the EP?

G_Staniszevska: This issue poses something of a problem, since Poland started talking about the subject too late – it takes half a year, minimum, for this enormous structure that is the EU to generate a draft for a solution of such a problem. Almost until the day of the summit we merely spoke of the problem of a German-Russian agreement regarding energy security, which was concluded over our heads – the meat issue suddenly “sprung up” only recently, which caused confusion and dismay. All the comments I heard in the EP were supportive of Poland – calling for solidarity and demanding of Russia to treat all EU members equally.

Zuzia: How is the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Anna Fotyga and the Ministry itself perceived by the EP?

G_Staniszevska: Madam Minister is absent at very important discussions within the EU – therefore she isn’t perceived too favorably, although some claim that this pleases the Western countries – as Poland suddenly ceased demanding various things.

Wojadam: Regarding current affairs – do you think the bedroom scandal in Samoobrona will cause the coalition to collapse?

G_Staniszevska: I don’t know.

Question from palczyński: What is your opinion on Turkey’s potential accession to the EU?

G_Staniszevska: I understand the political concept – it’s about proving that the mainly Christian, wealthy Europe is also open to impoverished Islam. I know however that the execution of this integration will be very difficult, as the cultural differences are vast. Generally speaking – I support it 😊.

Ewa_s: What was the most pleasant surprise, and the least pleasant, when you began working in the EP?

G_Staniszevska: The pleasant one – the universal will to reach a compromise, resulting from the structure of the EP, which forces the construction of coalitions and compromises. The unwritten rule of having at least the four largest factions in the EP, representing the majority of societies of Europe, sign resolution drafts, was also nice. And it is actually being pursued – in Poland it would be unthinkable for a bill to be signed by PO, PiS, SLD and Samoobrona – while in the EP it’s standard procedure. As for things unpleasant or strange – the fact that the community is so weak. The national approach prevails constantly – and not only among the new countries, but mainly among the old ones – even though the European Communities are 50 years old...

Zuzia: People are talking about limiting bureaucracy within the EU, what are the specific propositions, apart from the “one seat” initiative, to limit the administration expenses in the EP?

G_Staniszevska: It is an important and still current subject, but one that is difficult to resolve due to, for example, the admission of new countries and the increase of personnel – Commissioners, MEPs, translators, office clerks...

Zuzia: How do “informal” talks and negotiations look like in reality? Are the MEPs who don’t know foreign languages using translators, or are they simply passive during conversations with their colleagues from other countries?

G_Staniszevska: Informal negotiations consist of each group delegating 2-3 persons (who know French and English, although sometimes that is a problem – usually we agree on a working language) – the groups number about 10 persons, who start negotiating and re-shaping projects.

Question from yorker: Do you think Poland will ever adjust its legislation on social conventions to the legal norms of other European Union members?

G_Staniszevska: There is no such thing as legislation on social conventions – I think the issue is question of the conventions themselves. I am certain that it will be so – through mutual contacts, and the transfer of certain norms of social conduct.

Chriz: Why is it that Poles are more positively inclined towards the EU and its government, than towards the Polish parliament?

G_Staniszevska: I think it is because in the EP you can see the pursuit of a compromise, one does not wage “political wars”, aiming to destroy their opponent, which is sometimes the case in the Polish parliament.

Homer88: Which of the privileges granted to MEPs do you find most to your liking?

G_Staniszevska: I don’t see any special privileges apart from being aware of what an honor it is to be a MEP – which can be both pleasant and burdensome.

M_ch_wawa: If you could pursue a different career, would you stick to the European Parliament, or choose something outside politics?

G_Staniszevska: I’ve always wanted to sit on my commune’s council, and history, along with Solidarity, pushed me further, to the Polish Sejm, and now on to the EP. I think that maybe in the future I will eventually get to sit on my commune’s council...

G_Staniszevska: Thank you all for an interesting conversation. Have a merry, and – even if only slightly – snowy Christmas. And, of course, a happy new year.