

De Tocqueville's Poland

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Twenty years since the big move to democracy and the nation is taking stock. A bit unfortunate that the commemoration falls at the culmination of the European parliamentary elections. From the glimpses I catch, the focus is on recollection of the turning points, and the assigning of blame or the claiming of credit.

Not being from the home team and not party to the partisan debates, my reflections have been elsewhere. Namely, the question of how far has the nation really come in twenty years? Is it more or less than might have been expected? Is it more or less than the examples set by others to date?

For my measure, I turn to de Tocqueville, the famed French traveler to the United States from the 1830's who wrote what many still consider the top review of American society and democracy.

And why not? I too am a student of a foreign nation. I have travelled throughout Poland, met the people, studied the ways, met the celebrities, observed the politicians, talked with them, written of them.

Book one, Chapter 13, part one:

"On my arrival in the United States I was surprised to find so much distinguished talent among the subjects, and so little among the heads of the Government. It is a well-authenticated fact, that at the present day the most able men in the United States are very rarely placed at the head of affairs; and it must be acknowledged that such has been the result in proportion as democracy has outstepped all its former limits. The race of American statesmen has evidently dwindled most remarkably in the course of the last fifty years." (Find it here: <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/t/tocqueville/alexis/democracy/book1.html#book1.3>)

In short, the more mature the democracy, the baser the political class. Amongst the reasons: in a free society, individuals of character who are capable of creating

value, do so. Leaving a different sort to government. Men of character are called to, and accept, democratic governance only in dramatic times. 1776, 1989.

In the spirit of de Tocqueville,

And from the bottom of my heart,

I congratulate every Pole on the very quick march to such a mature democracy.

Tysiac lat! May democratic Poland live to be 1000!

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