

Speech by President Donald Tusk at the European Policy Centre conference

I feel really honoured to be invited by you, especially since today we celebrate the 20th anniversary of the EPC. There is no better way of doing this than by having a common serious and realistic reflection on the future of Europe. Frankly speaking, I also feel a little uncomfortable in the role of a speaker, instead of listening to your advice. The role of a listener would be for sure more natural today. But as you know well, politicians who are able to - and who want to listen to people wiser than them, are still a very rare commodity. But you have taken the risk of listening to my remarks, which I appreciate very much indeed. When I gave my first policy statement ten years ago, as Prime Minister of Poland, I spoke for nearly three hours. One of the commentators correctly observed that had my speech been as wise as it was long, it would have been one of the best in Polish history. From that moment on, I always speak briefly, which doesn't necessarily mean - wisely. Today, I will also be brief.

But before I begin, I would again like to express my gratitude and deep respect for Herman Van Rompuy, who is not only my predecessor and president of the EPC, but also my friend. When two years ago you handed me the little brass bell, a symbol of our presidential power, (the word "power" is in this context a delicate overstatement), I said I was your greatest admirer. Not just because you supported me as your successor. To be honest, I had absolutely no idea what I was getting into. Back then we all admired you for helping to steer us, to steer Europe out of the storm.

For five years - as one of the Prime Ministers around the table - I witnessed your skills: creating compromises; finding solutions; establishing trust, among often tough characters, hardly angels. To tell you the truth, it isn't any better today. Yes: Herman Van Rompuy in fact personifies traditional European political principles, which are also very important to me: trust, common sense, moderation and decency. We all thank you for your excellent work, Herman. We miss you.

Unfortunately, your successes did not put a definite end to European problems. Subsequent crises appeared on the horizon. And please do not link this directly with my taking office as President of the European Council. The migration crisis, the still unresolved dilemmas of the eurozone, lasting tensions in eastern Ukraine, Brexit - this is our daily bread. Before I say a few words about Brexit - the most debated subject both in London and on the continent - allow me to share with you a more general reflection.

The most serious crisis of modern times is the weakening, if not the breakdown, of faith in the durability and purpose of traditional values, which are a foundation of the European Union and, more broadly, of the whole political community of the West. The West in civilizational, not geographical terms. These are the values which bind all the main ideological currents in Europe: liberalism, conservatism and socialism. Human rights, civil liberties, including the freedom of speech and religion, free market and a competitive economy based on private property, reasonable and fair redistribution of goods, restrictions on power resulting from rules and tradition, tolerance and political pluralism; my generation knows this catalogue by heart. I do not need to remind you that the creation of the European Union was a response to a historic catastrophe. The source of this catastrophe was the questioning of those values and treating national egoisms, the use of violence and the unlimited right of the stronger to dictate conditions for the weaker as the norm.

As Stefan Zweig wrote in those days: "It is an iron law that those who will be caught up in the great movements determining the course of their times always fail to recognise them in their early stages."

There is no point comparing these two periods. I only recall his words because today, in the midst of dramatic events of which we are participants as well as witnesses, we lack the will and the time for a more profound diagnosis of a great risk - different from the one we know from the past, but still great. Today, too many people give in freely to the flow of events, without even trying to recognise the essence or scale of the threat.

The threat today is that of the disintegration of Europe, in a political and ideological sense. It is no coincidence that very often those who question liberal democracy are the same ones who call for the break-up of the European Union. It is not surprising, since the Union is not only a political organisation which restricts national egoisms and eliminates violence as a basis for relations between countries, it is also a unique territory of freedom.

You will have noticed that the anti-liberal virus produces similar symptoms: both in Europe and beyond. Its carriers dislike the

Union, so they are happy about Brexit. They don't want trans-Atlantic solidarity, so they promote isolationism. They look up to Putin and support Trump.

They are becoming louder and louder in increasing numbers. In Europe, we see them moving from the political periphery onto the main stage, often relying on support from political allies outside Europe who are already in power. One of their defining features is that they do not offer anything positive, instead feeding only on our weaknesses, conflicts, and the mood of uncertainty.

They proclaim a need for total change, they want to subvert the political order we call liberal democracy. Change for the sake of change has become their fetish. As the leader of

Alternative für Deutschland

said, commenting on the presidential campaign in the US, and I quote: "it might not be better under Trump, but at least with him there is the chance to change."

What they lack is positive ideas and designs of concrete solutions. But what they do not lack is the energy and determination in their march for influence and power. It is remarkable how all too often politicians of the moderate centre in comparison to them come across as listless, unwilling to fight, with no faith in their own convictions. As if they've fallen into a trap of fatalism, which they have no strength or desire to free themselves from. And we remember from the past that in the most dramatic moment of our history, in the 1930s, the advocates of a liberal order gave up virtually without a fight, even though they had all the cards in their hands. Ordinary people turned their backs on them, seeing how weak and hesitant they were. People didn't turn away from freedom because they were fed up with it. No, they simply lost faith that the freedom camp was able to put a stop to evil, however they understood it. They no longer believed that the moderate centre was a guarantee of security. And I am sure you remember who took their place.

I categorically reject this fatalistic approach. I categorically reject this temptation to give in to these trends. I do not accept arguments about the decadence of Europe and the West, because I deeply believe that we have built together a world which, despite its imperfections, is still the best of worlds. We must prove, however, every single day, that liberal democracy doesn't have to be a synonym of weakness. It is worth keeping in mind the words of Blaise Pascal, "Justice without force is powerless; force without justice is tyrannical." To paraphrase him: liberal democracy without force is powerless, even pathetic.

This is how people interpreted our actions, or rather our lack of action, in the first months of the migration crisis. They saw every day that we were incapable or unwilling to apply the rules and procedures that we had established ourselves. There was not only a lack of realism or rational assessment, but above all, a lack of determination to enforce the law. This became the main reason for the surge in popularity of radicals throughout Europe.

When it comes to migration, we are slowly turning the corner. Because we have rejected the fatalistic approach, expressed in the simple declaration: "There are too many of them to stop them". People are ready to trust us again, as long as we show that we are capable of regaining control, that it is us who once again set the conditions and procedures on our borders.

It's a similar case with free trade. The emotions and confusion surrounding TTIP and CETA are also a kind of fuel for eurosceptics and radicals. And it is up to us whether we maintain Europe's position as the world's centre of free trade. Most people know that free trade is in Europe's interest, but they also know what they want from their leaders negotiating those agreements, namely the protection of European interests. They want to believe and to know that we are able to dictate our own conditions, because free trade must also mean fair trade.

For the last three years, trade ministers and hundreds of experts have been racking their brains trying to answer questions such as: should the EU have the right to defend itself against unfair trade practices by whatever means are necessary and acceptable within the framework of the World Trade Organisation? I would like to put a stop to this endless deliberation. Because we have the right, we have the duty, and we have the capabilities.

Next week already I will try to convince as many European leaders as possible to take the same approach. An EU which does not have the tools to defend itself against trade hooligans will not build support for free trade, which will lead to Europe ultimately dropping out of global competition. Either we demonstrate that we are able to defend our interests, or the political winners will again be the populists and isolationists.

Finally, let's move on to Brexit. As for the negotiations, the situation is pretty clear. Its framework will be set out by the European Council - that is by the guidelines foreseen in the Treaty. Our task will be to protect the interests of the EU as a whole and the interests of each of the 27 member states. And also to stick unconditionally to the Treaty rules and fundamental values. By this I mean, inter alia, the conditions for access to the single market with all four freedoms. There will be no compromises in this regard.

When it comes to the essence of Brexit, it was largely defined in the UK during the referendum campaign. We all remember the promises, which cumulated in the demand to "take back control". Namely the "liberation" from European jurisdiction, a "no" to the freedom of movement or further contributions to the EU budget. This approach has definitive consequences, both for the position of the UK government and for the whole process of negotiations. Regardless of magic spells, this means a de facto will to radically loosen relations with the EU, something that goes by the name of "hard Brexit".

This scenario will in the first instance be painful for Britons. In fact, the words uttered by one of the leading campaigners for Brexit and proponents of the "cake philosophy" was pure illusion: that one can have the EU cake and eat it too. To all who believe in it, I propose a simple experiment. Buy a cake, eat it, and see if it is still there on the plate.

The brutal truth is that Brexit will be a loss for all of us. There will be no cakes on the table. For anyone. There will be only salt and vinegar. If you ask me if there is any alternative to this bad scenario, I would like to tell you that yes, there is. And I think it is useless to speculate about "soft Brexit" because of all the reasons I've mentioned. These would be purely theoretical speculations. In my opinion, the only real alternative to a "hard Brexit" is "no Brexit". Even if today hardly anyone believes in such a possibility. We will conduct the negotiations in good faith, defend the interests of the EU 27, minimise the costs and seek the best possible deal for all. But as I have said before, I am afraid that no such outcome exists that will benefit either side. Of course it is and can only be for the UK to assess the outcome of the negotiations and determine if Brexit is really in their interest. Paraphrasing Hannah Arendt's words: "a full understanding of all the consequences of the political process is the only way to reverse the irreversible flow of history". Thank you.

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