

Keynote speech by President Donald Tusk at the EPP Saint Géry Dialogue

Thank you very much. First of all, thank you for your important words about terrorism. The terrorists have no chance to break us, our common spirit and Brussels are much stronger than their hatred and extremism. I'm absolutely sure about that. And thank you for this invitation, I am really proud to be here in such great company and in such a great place.

I am not an economist, so please do not expect from me any expertise, knowledge or prescriptions. I am also not a fortune-teller. What is more, I do not believe that it is humanly possible to predict the future. I am committed to the Polish saying that "When we make plans, God laughs". So if you ask me what Europe and its place in the world and global economy will be like in 25 or 50 years, I will honestly say I have absolutely no idea.

I find some consolation in the fact that those who many years ago described a distant future, namely the times we are living in now, must have made God laugh out loud. And many among them had a reputation of wisemen who were deep believers in their prophetic abilities. In fact, ever since the biblical Jeremiah and Greek Cassandra, prophecies and forecasts have dealt mainly with catastrophes, including the end of the world. This prophesy of the end of the world will certainly be fulfilled, but the dispute focuses on the precise date, rather than the on the substance itself.

Nevertheless, I accepted the offer of our leader, Joseph Daul, to give a brief introduction to today's discussion, because I have learnt from my long and varied political experience that leaving the economy only in the hands of the economists is as serious a mistake as leaving a war only in the hands of the generals. This political experience, starting with being in illegal opposition under Communism, and my passion for history (after all I am a history teacher by profession) allows me to formulate one simple rule. Since we don't know the future, let us already prepare ourselves for every eventuality, for every possible scenario. We are not able to guess what God's plans are, (as you know, some even claim that God doesn't plan either, but only plays dice.) This is exactly why we must be strong, flexible and above all moral. We must also make ourselves realise once again, what Europe means to us and who we are when we call ourselves Europeans. And why we want Europe (as a continent?, a political power?, an idea?, a culture?, as a monetary union?) to lead and not to be led.

In different moments in the history of modern Europe, there have been ups and downs. Economic crises are inscribed in this history, as are economic theories and efforts of the politicians, who strive to overcome them. For more than 20 years, I was engaged in Poland in such a process, called transformation.

The scale of this transformation was enormous but the point I want to make today is that it was sailing largely in uncharted waters. There were no textbooks on transition, although we had the general rulebook called the Washington consensus and a few examples of somewhat ambiguous results of managing transition from Latin America. Today, I know why it turned out to be a success.

We were then looking for solutions which were completely new to us, but in fact at the same time it was a return to our European traditions. We understood that the new solutions and tools would bring about a positive and a permanent change only when we would re-build the foundations on which Europe stood. In other words, when we would re-build liberal democracy together with freedom as its main value, the rule of law and institutions guaranteeing checks and balances, the free market and private property, with an effective state as a guardian of the citizens' security and protector of the weaker.

Today I have a sense of a peculiar déjà vu. The whole of Europe is scrabbling, like Poland a quarter of a century ago, for a way out of our economic problems. And as in the past, now I know that concentrating on technicalities is not enough. It is worth discussing and we need to discuss new projects, but we cannot become prisoners of expert analyses and solutions. Although helpful, they will not suffice in these stormy times. Because if we stopped at that, it would mean that we are still hostages to Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign slogan - "It's the economy, stupid".

What was a great strategy in times of relative stability, falls well short of what we need today. I have been in politics long enough to know that any transition, including the one shaking up the Western world, is primarily a political challenge. "It's the politics,

stupid".

Democratic capitalism that we have taken so long for granted requires significant transformation in response to the crisis, both in regard to economic policy, but above all to political institutions. We need a political transformation not to invalidate the principles of liberal democracy, but to protect them. Like in "Il Gattopardo", "The Leopard", by Giuseppe di Lampedusa; "Se vogliamo che tutto rimanga come è, bisogna che tutto cambi." Which means that "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change."

So if you ask me if Europe is going to lead or be led, my answer is: it depends on the quality of our leaders and their ability to act together. To experiment with bold policies but within the framework of the values underpinning democratic capitalism. If we want to lead, we must show stamina in the face of populism polluting our debate. Populism which offers nothing new but a return to disastrous politics of division, nationalism and autocratic rule. As we all know, those policies will not only fail to bring about economic recovery, but be disastrous for peace, stability and human rights of our citizens.

Therefore my real concern is not the lack of faith in the creativity of European economists. I am confident that, as in the past, new tools and techniques will be found. It is only a matter of time. More important, however, is that in the search for them we will not be under a delusion that we are going to find one miraculous prescription, a silver bullet, which will release us from an obligation of political leadership, and, once and for all, resolve all our problems, like a Philosopher's stone.

Europe will cope with economic challenges. After all, it is not about a lack of new ideas. We keep debating on strengthening the economic and monetary union, common debt or eurobonds to boost investments. Some even go so far as contemplating the possibility of helicopter money, that is money sent directly from the central banks to every citizen. Ideas that until recently were unthinkable. But in order for any economic idea to work, we need to meet one condition, namely that Europe must once again believe in itself. That Europe is a greater and a more profound phenomenon than only a one-dimensional economic project. Even most brilliant economic concepts will be of no use if politicians abdicate their duties. Or, even worse, when politicians and ideologues who question the foundations of liberal democracy will come to the fore. As it is happening in Europe's neighbourhood. Let me say more, they are already among us, feeding on the weaknesses of traditional elites. You will find them in your ranks. Unconcerned by the crisis, they want to use it as an argument for an alternative illiberal version of democracy. They feel good in a dialogue with all the outside powers who despise us, Europeans. And they couldn't care less if Europe becomes a global economic leader, because they are irritated that Europe exists as a political entity.

One thing we can be sure of, is that we are not sure of anything. Could you have predicted only one year ago that a favourite contender in the US presidential campaign would say "It's possible that we are going to let NATO go. Maybe NATO will dissolve, and that's OK." Or, that two days ago, in the so-called Panama papers we would come across the names of so many political leaders, let alone the name of the most important man on this planet -- at least to me, as I am crazy about football -- Leo Messi. Even Margaret Thatcher had not predicted that someone would come up with an idea of Brexit, when in 1975 she said that "At a time of uncertainty in world affairs, Europe gives us a far better chance of peace and security." Let the words of Margaret Thatcher be a punch line for my several quite banal, I'm aware of this, reflections.

As I have already mentioned, my predictive powers are close to zero, so I couldn't foresee what my agenda would be for this evening. My loss, not yours. Anyway, I wish you a great and fruitful discussion. Thank you very much.

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