

# Acceptance speech by President Donald Tusk upon receiving the Honorary Doctorate from the Technical University of Dortmund

## Press contacts

### Preben Aamann

European Council President Spokesperson

+32 2 281 51 50

+32 476 85 05 43

I am honoured, proud and moved by this special distinction bestowed upon me today. Especially that you made this decision on the 50th anniversary of your university. My emotion is even greater since I have always sympathised with Borussia Dortmund, and of course – like almost all Germans and Poles, I am much more interested in football than politics. *Ich bin ein Dortmunder* – every typical Polish football fan might say without hesitation. I don't know if you know that from the Poles – past and present – who have played for Borussia, you could make up quite a decent first eleven. Few today remember that Dortmund has been not only Piszczek, Lewandowski, Błaszczykowski, but also Ebi Smolarek or, in the older days, Heinz Kwiatkowski, Kapituliński, Schlebrowski, Kelbassa, Michałek and Niepekło. This is why today I am happy together with you: that you are top of the league, that you have won the *Revierderby* and that you are a whole 9 points above, well... you know who!

Stop! – my wife would shout, if she were here, as she always repeats that I shouldn't reduce my whole life to football. But I started off with football not only because I am crazy about it. To be honest, I always dreamt of a career as a football player, not a politician, but I simply lacked the talent. However, I have played long enough as an amateur, and I have been involved long enough as a fan of my beloved club, Lechia Gdańsk (by the way, we also won our derby and are also league leaders!), to understand the phenomenon and significance of the emotions that come with tribal conflicts, the phenomenon of the brutal division between "us" and "them". A division in which thinking is replaced by feelings, where rational arguments give way to myths, symbols and colours – tribal colours, club colours or national colours, and where the leader is more important than views and values. I have experienced how easy it is to fall into the trap of simplified identity, built on the negation of other communities. Other – and therefore alien, and therefore hostile. The division between "us" and "them" justifies the worst emotions, including hatred and contempt. As a very young man, I fell into this trap more than once, and I must admit that I wasn't the best-behaved of boys. I observed from close-up the process (in fact, I took part in it) of

spreading certain behaviours from the stadium to the street, from sport to politics. And a lot of time had to pass, before I understood that the job of every individual in the public sphere, in politics and in social life, is to avoid, or at least limit, conflict and violence.

It wasn't an easy process. I remember that, back in the eighties, when we came out into the streets to demonstrate against the communists, and fight with the police, I rebelled, deep in my heart, against the words of the Polish Pope: "overcome evil with good". Because to overcome – I thought – was to defeat and destroy the opponent. And that the only sensible answer to violence, is violence. It turned out, however, that real victory means not giving in to this logic. The experience of Polish *Solidarność*, my experience – similarly to the beautiful stories of Ghandi, Mandela and others – has shown that you can win by rejecting the tragic, truly devilish alternative: either "us" or "them". Because if we don't reject it, as Timothy Snyder has noted, the first and most important matter in politics becomes the question: "who are we, and who are they?" rather than: "what is the world like and what we can do about it?" When we accept that politics is about "us and them", only about "us and them", we also accept that fear and anxiety form the basis of politics. Some think that such emotions can be the source of their power; the truth is that when we surrender to them, we become – against our will – an easy and malleable material in the hands of potential autocrats. I can see this – in all its clarity – in Europe today. Please don't ask me about names, because I won't say them anyway – and besides, you know full well who I'm talking about.

The informal anthem of *Solidarność* used to be a song called *Prayer at Sunrise* by Natan Tenenbaum, a Polish Jew, who had to flee Poland as a result of the anti-Semitic campaign unleashed by the communist government exactly 50 years ago, when your university was being founded. We sang the lyrics:

"Oh Lord, deliver me from contempt, and from hatred shield me God", slowly learning the real meaning of these words. The fact that millions of people believed in these words, and thousands believed that you can fight without resorting to violence, became our first, and most important, gateway to Europe.

Because the European Union – the way I understand it – is founded on positive thinking and positive values. There would not be our Europe – and there will not be our Europe – without reconciliation, without solidarity and without mutual respect.

You don't need to graduate in engineering or architecture from the Technical University of Dortmund to understand that in politics, bridges are more important than walls, though we know how much easier and faster it is to raise a wall, than to build a bridge. I am convinced that this is the reason why you have taken the trouble of studying: to avoid the temptation of simplifying and cutting corners. That in the spiritual, but also the political dimension, you will always be builders of bridges, and not walls.

Once again, I would like to thank you very much for this distinction and beautiful laudation. Listening to a laudation about yourself is always the

most pleasant part of such ceremonies. For a moment, you can believe that you are much better than you really are. And, please allow me, dear friends, to accept today not only the noble title of *honoris causa* doctorate, but also to uphold the maxim of your first ever honorary laureate, president Johannes Rau: "To reconcile, not divide". Thank you.

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