

Speech by President Donald Tusk: “November 11, 2018: Poland and Europe. Two Anniversaries, Two Lessons”

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I am very moved to have the opportunity to meet with so many circles of people for whom the Freedom Games are the place for an annual meeting which is important not only for those taking part, but also for everyone who believes that freedom in Poland has a future.

This day is especially significant for me because it was exactly 40 years ago, minus one day, that I first had the opportunity to take part in a demonstration on the anniversary of independence – which was illegal at the time – beneath the Jan Sobieski III statue in Gdańsk. 40 years ago.

I remember that day very well because two weeks later, I married my wife. As you can imagine, those events of 11 November ended in what was for me my first personal experience of political repression. But it wasn't the citizens' militia or the security service, just the reaction of my then fiancée when I was late because of the demonstration and I attempted to give politics as an excuse for my lateness to our last date as an engaged couple. If my wife had known at the time that this explanation would pop up so often over the next 40 years, then my personal history might have looked completely different.

That day I wondered – I was a history student back then, and I was passionate about the history of, what else, the 20-year inter-war period and the life of the politician Józef Piłsudski – I wondered whether I was expecting freedom and independence, whether I was expecting the same sort of miraculous conspiracy of events as those which, 60 years earlier – it was then the 60th anniversary – had led to Poland gaining its independence. I wondered whether something that was impossible could once again turn out to be possible, like it had in 1918. Because exactly what had happened then really had been impossible.

First of all, no-one could have dreamed (although some poets and writers did manage to a little) that all at once, at the same time, the three partitioning powers would collapse.

Perhaps no-one could imagine a nation which had shed so much blood, since we

too suffered tragic casualties during WWI, which were all the more tragic because Polish soldiers were fighting in the armies of three occupiers – almost half a million victims. So it seemed even more unlikely that we could win, especially on the battlefield, in the great clash that was the war with the Russian Bolsheviks, but also in the uprisings against Germany in defence of and for the establishment of our new borders. To win the conflicts with Russia and Germany at practically the same time seemed utterly improbable.

And there was also a third, you could almost say political, miracle: that after everything, after a brutal war, after a dramatic effort in the days leading to independence, but above all after 123 years of partitions, we managed to stitch those three mismatched pieces together into a single Polish state.

What was necessary to make it happen? Most certainly: shared political goals which were universally acknowledged as our own. Poles at the time had no more differences than they do today – and to be honest, there were a lot of reasons why they should differ more among themselves than they do now. But at that critical point in time there was never any doubt as to what the common denominator of political goals was at a more general level. And that, of course, was independence and the establishment of a Polish state.

There was outstanding leadership. And here we are of course talking about figures like Daszyński, Dmowski, Korfanty and Witos. But also we always really think of that one symbolic figure, who was actually, not just symbolically, the father of Polish independence: Józef Piłsudski.

We also had wise and very active diplomacy. At Versailles, the final verdict on the statehood, the shape of the statehood and the borders of Poland would have been different if it hadn't been for extraordinarily active and thoughtful diplomacy. And here I am not just thinking of Roman Dmowski. I always hold my fellow citizen Antoni Abraham close to my heart, the Kashubian who also went and found his way to Versailles so that he could – as the story goes, but I like such positive stories – loudly bang his fist on the table and tell Lloyd George, 'There is no Poland without Kashubia'.

Yes, at that time we were lucky enough to have people who stood up for Poland, but we also had something that is invaluable in such situations: a willingness to make sacrifices – the war with the Bolsheviks alone cost us 60 000 lives. Good diplomacy and good leadership would come to nothing without sacrifice and determination. And good luck was also important – let us not delude ourselves, we had a great deal of good luck of the geopolitical kind. After all, it has been known since Napoleonic times that, in politics, if someone does not have good luck, it will not lead to any serious problems until later,; let us therefore always seek out people who have good luck, or who at the very least believe that they can be lucky.

Today, on the eve of the milestone 100th anniversary of independence, few remember that we are also celebrating other milestone anniversaries this November, all of which are directly connected to that experience. It is precisely 30 years since the televised debate between Lech Wałęsa and Alfred Miodowicz. A debate which in fact paved the way for the Round Table and which

in some sense symbolised the end of the Communist era in Poland. In the decade since the moment when I stood quite helpless at the foot of the Sobieski monument in Gdańsk – there were barely several hundred of us there at that time, and surely – like me – no-one believed that such a miracle would take place in our lifetime – over the course of those ten years we lived through the amazing Polish experience that was the first Solidarity movement.

In fact, in 1988 something happened that was also impossible – and in some sense the circumstances surrounding the events that took place in the late 1980s were similar to those seen in November 1918. The impossible became possible, because Solidarity turned out to be as strong a community of general goals as the Polish people had been way back then, one hundred years ago. We had good leadership. Lech Wałęsa proved himself to be an outstanding political leader, emerging as the true father of Polish freedom. We also benefited from a shrewd (albeit not national this time round) diplomatic service, for weren't Pope John Paul II in the Vatican, Zbigniew Brzezinski in Washington and Jerzy Giedroyc in Paris diplomats who upheld Polish freedom and Polish independence? Here we could mention many names of people who have demonstrated that this legacy of Polish politicians and diplomats from the times of 1918 Versailles also placed them under an obligation, from which they have graduated with flying colours. In addition, we enjoyed good luck from a geopolitical point of view – what had been such a fundamental source of our independence in 1918 was also bound to accompany us in 1989. Before our very eyes, and with our (albeit modest) participation, the Soviet Union and the entire Communist bloc disintegrated. The Soviet leaders took decisions, one after the other, on the basis of seemingly irrational viewpoints. Just as in 1918, we exploited that geopolitical good luck to the full. It taught us a lesson which to my mind is unquestionable with regard to Poland in 2018 – first, we must remember (as also pointed out by Józef Piłsudski) that independence is as difficult to achieve and secure as it is to maintain. In any case, the lesson of the twenty-year period which ended tragically in September 1939 is the clearest proof of that.

And here I am coming to the crux of the matter – today we are not condemned to passively observing geopolitical events taking place around us and around Poland. We have all the tools and instruments, we have the potential and the historical circumstances to enable us to ensure that the geopolitical good luck with which we have been favoured twice in our history lasts for as long as possible in our times too. The clearest expression of that geopolitical serendipity is, of course, our presence in the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance. However, let us remember the warnings which were relevant then – 100 years ago, 60 years ago, ten years ago – and which will probably remain relevant always. We must do everything in our power to safeguard that good luck as the threats are glaringly obvious at this time. First, the global geopolitical order. I do not have to explain to anyone in this room how real the Thucydides trap has become in human history – but on a truly global scale – when the geopolitical order founded on the domination of a single force begins to change before our very eyes – and it will not come as a surprise to anyone when I say that today's dynamic balance, which may soon turn into a highly dynamic imbalance, is currently held by those two colossal

movers on the global scene, China and the USA. Poles apart, it would seem. Today, such a proposition would make no sense. Everything that happens in Washington and Beijing affects our future, both directly and indirectly.

I am saying this because our traditional closest partner, the United States, is behaving differently in the context of this great global challenge. I would like to say that, as far as I recall, today for the first time in history we have an American administration which, to put it delicately, is not very enthusiastically tuned in to a united, strong Europe. And I'm talking here about facts, not about propaganda statements. And I say this as someone who has – let's say – the satisfaction of having fairly frequent direct exchanges with the President of the United States. Maybe he's quite open with me because we are namesakes, and I have no doubt whatsoever that in those matters which – in my view – are the geopolitical foundation of Poland's independence, namely a strong European Union, close integration between Europe and the United States, even closer than today, and the transatlantic community, which is the essence of the global order, I have no doubt that with regard to all of this I have different views from my most influential namesake in the world.

In addition to this we have the situation on our eastern border. Here, too, we have to deal with this peculiar Thucydides trap. Here, too, Russia, observing the global power shift, reacted aggressively to Ukraine.

We have a situation inside the European Union, a situation which is illustrated most clearly by Brexit – the departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union, but also many other negative phenomena – negative from the European point of view, and therefore also from the point of view of Poland's national interest, and the interest of the Polish state. I am talking here about the rise of nationalism and anti-European, not only rhetoric, but also anti-European emotion, in many European capitals. This does not yet apply to today's leaders, but these forces are growing before our very eyes. They are forces which back conflict rather than cooperation, disintegration rather than integration. When I travel around Europe, I sometimes get the impression that in many European capitals there are parties and politicians who are waiting for an Archduke Ferdinand situation to happen. They are waiting for this dream conflict that will change the world order and the European order based on the safeguarding of common principles and values. This was one of the biggest surprises for me when, relatively recently, half a year ago at the G7 summit, precisely in a direct political confrontation with President Trump, we argued over whether an order based on principles and common values was still applicable for the seven most powerful countries in the Western world. And probably for the first time in our modern history, the President of the United States said he was not interested in continuing such thinking or such action. And he deleted, virtually with his own hand, the sentence, which has always appeared in the declarations of the seven most powerful countries in the Western world to the effect that we seek to safeguard a world order based on principles and values. This matter is really very serious, especially when in our country we also have politicians and political forces that seek to change the order which in my, and not only in my opinion, is the basis and foundation of our present and future

independence. What I'm referring to is, of course, the future of the European Union.

I wish to clearly emphasise here that I see no coincidence in the fact that in virtually all of Europe, whether openly or more discreetly, those who are enthusiastic about Brexit, those who are more or less enthusiastic about Washington's further steps towards isolationism, those who are flirting with Vladimir Putin with increasing intensity, they are all attempting, also more or less unambiguously, to persuade us that the European Union in general, or in its current shape, has no future. The problem is that today, those who are cheering on nationalisms in Europe, those who are betting on disintegration and conflict, will inevitably lead to an absolutely fundamental threat also to our Polish independence. Today, whoever takes a stand against Poland's strong position in a united Europe is in reality taking a stand against Poland's independence.

I – not because of my function, but rather because of my profound conviction that it may bring one of greatest possible political threats to my homeland again – I want to say today, on the eve of the anniversary of independence, that it depends on us, here in Poland, whether politicians will bring about the break-up of the European Union and take Poland out of the European Union. It depends on us what happens in this lunatic parade – and I am using this expression intentionally – which began a few years ago in the United Kingdom – I talk about a lunatic parade, because I'm thinking back to Prime Minister Cameron who in his opinion did everything he could to keep the United Kingdom in the European Union, but in actual fact did everything he could to make the United Kingdom leave the European Union. It is slightly reminiscent of the actions of some politicians in 1914, when the First World War began. I'm obviously not comparing these two events, but rather a certain logic of the consequences of the actions of politicians who are incapable of calculating sensibly and incapable of predicting the effects of their actions. And I want to refer directly to what is happening in our country today.

Well, I am ready to believe all those who say today in Poland "We don't want to leave the European Union". I am more afraid of the British scenario – the more they don't want to leave the European Union, the more they leave. But also, we must not be gullible. If I hear the Polish Vice-president of the European Parliament say "if European politicians continue to act with the same political tact, in Poland we will soon be facing the need to hold a referendum on remaining in the European Union". This is the PiS party-nominated Vice-president of the European Parliament; the leader of tomorrow's Independence Parade, in which Polish authorities will also take part. Here is a quote: "Today we are saying that the European Union in its present form is coming to an end. And that's just as well, because it is a bad project." I will not mention what was said about an imaginary community. I wish to tell you that there can be no vagueness or jokes in this regard; these are not anecdotes, they are not lessons or lectures on ancient history. History is happening in front of our eyes and – also in front of our eyes – a dramatic event could occur, all the more so because in a few months' time we will be electing the parliament in Europe. It cannot be ruled out that two political currents might occupy very powerful positions in that parliament: one,

increasingly brown-shirted, unambiguously anti-European, looking more and more clearly towards nationalism, working against the European Union as such. The other current belongs to those who want to integrate the European Union as much as possible. There might be no space for Poland in either of those scenarios if the dominant policy direction in Warsaw at present emphasises national resentment and scenarios that are negative for the European Union. This is not a question of the coming decades, but of the coming months. Within the next few months another chapter will be written – it will be either an optimistic or a grim chapter in the history of European integration. And believe me, these words, these events, will also directly concern our independence. There is also another issue – that is the issue of a certain internal dynamics here in Poland; it is a question of the essence of independence – why we want to be independent, why we need an independent state. We do, so that we can be free. There is no independence without rights and freedoms. We have an independent homeland so that free Poles can enjoy their rights and freedoms. If we really want Poland to be independent for the next 100 years or more, we must all establish a community of political goals, like we did in 1918 and in 1980. For me this community is a strong Poland in a united Europe, it is the constitutional order, the rule of law, civic freedoms, free and independent courts and media. It is also a good idea to remember to vaccinate your children.

Any history of any nation needs its heroes. I have already mentioned their names, but I wish to repeat clearly – as this will probably be very important today, the day before the independence anniversary. After all, it was Józef Piłsudski who said that a nation which does not respect its past does not deserve a good future. So let us emphasise this once again as clearly as possible: the hero and father of our independence is Józef Piłsudski, and the hero and father of our freedom is Lech Wałęsa – end of story.

And this fact cannot be changed by any arbitrary historical policy. I am convinced, and our history confirms, that the real, necessary, sacred myths of our independence and freedom are stronger than any propaganda used by political authorities of any kind.

As a final remark, I would like to share with you something about which I am deeply convinced, as I have been following it with bated breath and great emotion over many months. Please remember – as you are here in Łódź today, and you have come here in much greater numbers than anyone could have expected. But also remember this in the months to come, that it makes sense to act, that the year 1918 – the lessons we have drawn from it – the lessons of 1980 and 1988, have proven clearly that when we act, when we refrain from complaining, when we believe in our own strength, we can move mountains and we can make the impossible possible, because indeed every situation can be reversed – these could be words of hope, but they could also be words of warning, of course. And that is why – even though today our spirits may not be very high, which is understandable, as ‘November is a dangerous time for Poles’ – it is all the more important that we should, while celebrating the heroes of our independence today and tomorrow, think about what will happen in the spring – as May means ‘blissful paradise’ for Poles.

But then, maybe today is the moment, as you are sitting here today, to set up

an informal committee which will organise a great public event of historic scale on 3 May next year. This will be a very special moment, and it may well determine – if you are really numerous, more numerous than today in Łódź – whether a free and independent Poland, a free and united Europe will be not just a lesson in history, but also a lesson for the future. Anyway, I believe that all this bickering we are witnessing today over who will or will not take part in the march does not really make much sense. In this regard, I remain very faithful to another of my youth's heroes, Jacek Kuroń. I still remember those words of his: 'Do not burn the committees but set up your own'. So let us just leave this march alone and let us try, by not excluding anyone, by showing what Polish solidarity is really about, let us try to prove next May that the spring can be yours, ours, Poland's. And, you know, there is no point in waiting for a prince on a white horse. Remember what happened with General Anders – instead of a general on a white horse, we got a lady senator in business class. That is how this dream ended.

Therefore, above all, rely on yourselves. Whenever Polish people have relied on themselves, on their community, their solidarity, they have won. Besides – listen, my friends – Józef Piłsudski, when he was defeating the Bolsheviks, when he was, in fact, defending the community of the West, the community of freedom, not just our fatherland, against the political barbarity from the East (in a political, not just a geographical sense), was in a much more difficult position than we are in today. When Lech Wałęsa was defeating the Bolsheviks in a symbolic sense, when he brought out from within us the essence of what constitutes Europe, freedom, and also the nation, he was in a much more difficult position than we are in today. So listen, if they were able to defeat the actual Bolsheviks, then why would you not manage to defeat the present-day Bolsheviks?

Remember, without our, your, Polish people's rights and freedoms, there is no independence. Defend those rights, defend that freedom and defend Poland's independence. This is your responsibility. Thank you.

(Delivered in Polish)

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