

# Speech by President Donald Tusk on receiving lifetime membership of the UCD Law Society in Dublin

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Thank you for your welcome and for this honour.

As some of you may know, my name is Donald, after my father. I am a Catholic, like the overwhelming majority of my compatriots. I love football as well as rugby: my beloved sports club from my hometown has won 13 rugby union titles. I am a fan of W. B. Yeats, Samuel Beckett, U2 and Sinéad O'Connor (even if she did go a bit too far with John Paul the Second), Colin Farrell and Neil Jordan. I am even a fan of Conor McGregor, though I must say I have mixed feelings about his latest fight with a bus in New York.

I am as delighted with the poems of Seamus Heaney as I am with the drop goals of Jonathan Sexton. And my favourite memory from the Euro 2012 football championship is the Spain-versus-Ireland game. I am not talking about the result (it's better if I don't mention it at all), but I remember how moved I was, like all football fans, when thousands of Irish supporters sang *The Fields of The Fields of Athenry*, despite the defeat. I was there with them in Gdańsk at the time, not only in the stadium, but also in town after the match. (Don't ask me about the details, we had a few pints too many.) Last but not least: I don't like Brexit. Actually, that's an understatement: I believe Brexit is one of the saddest moments in twenty first-century European history. In fact, sometimes I am even furious about it.

From what I have told you about myself just now, it might seem that I am more Irish than some of you. Do you know that my political opponents in Poland even call me a redhead? Obviously, for no reason, as you can see. To sum up, it is no surprise that I feel so at home here in Ireland, and that I greatly appreciate your generous distinction, and the fact that you've accepted me as one of your own.

Going back briefly to Gdańsk. Listening to the green crowd singing when it was already four-nil (damn! I told myself not to mention the result), I thought to myself that no-one celebrates their defeats as beautifully and as heartily as the Irish, and the Poles. And history has given both of our countries quite a few opportunities for such celebrations. Lost uprisings, lost matches, and then singing out loud with tears in our eyes – this we have

always been the best at, in the whole world.

I heard that a German ambassador to Dublin once famously said that Ireland's history was sadder "even than Poland's". As a German, he knew what he was saying. I won't argue with you about who the leader is in this tragic ranking of national misery. What is certain is that Poland and Ireland are both worthy contenders. This could also be one of the reasons why we understand each other so well.

But instead of contemplating the past, I would rather recall the words of an alumnus of this University, James Joyce, who said, "history is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake". When you are Irish or Polish, it is not so easy to awake yourself from a nightmare. Historical bad fortune, difficult neighbourhoods, internal divisions – all of this has meant that, through the years, we have tasted victory so rarely, while so often swallowing the bitterness of defeat. This is why we should appreciate today's reality even more, both here on this island, and in my homeland on the Baltic coast. A reality in which independence, prosperity, peace and reconciliation have ceased to be just entries in a dictionary of unreal dreams.

Today, I think it's an exciting time to be Irish. According to surveys, the Irish are amongst the happiest people in Europe and the *most* optimistic about their future in the European Union. You are a young nation, with the Union's highest birth rate (I really appreciate it, it's impressive) and, for several years now, one of its fastest-growing economies. You have managed to combine fidelity with the past with a freedom from old anxieties. You became a country of immigration for the first time, receiving more people proportionately than the UK, yet no-one ever hears of any problems on this issue from Ireland. You are even moving on from the modern clichés of being the small, brave country that resolved its ancient quarrels and became a successful harnesser of globalisation. Meeting your young *Taoiseach* or watching the exploits of your rugby team, it is clear that something much more interesting is happening. There is a new confidence there, not dependent on the opinions of others. You are the first generation of Irish people with nothing to prove, who look to the future with a calm optimism rather than a determined hope. I would want no less for my own country. Where Ireland goes from here is your free choice. It will be very interesting to see what you do with it. No pressure.

Allow me once again to refer to the author of *Ulysses*, who stated in his *Exiles*: "If Ireland is to become a new Ireland, she must first become European." I recall these words because they could as well be dedicated to all other European nations, especially now, in the times of Brexit, when European entropy is again starting to compete with European gravity. We have many reasons to be satisfied, as a generation which has united Europe. But we have as many reasons for concern, as a generation that could still (unfortunately) make it to the gloomy and for sure spectacular show of another European disunion. You may think I am oversensitive to this threat. But our two countries don't need reminding about how much effort, suffering and time is needed to build peace and unity without coercion, in the conditions of freedom. And how little time and effort is needed to undermine and demolish this structure.

Wherever I look, I can see this dangerous potential for conflict. In my country, today marks the eighth anniversary of the plane crash in Smolensk, where the Polish president and many senior public and state officials died. Shared national mourning quickly changed into a painful and particularly nasty argument that has divided my nation ever since. While here in Dublin, and in Belfast, today, on the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, thousands of people are looking with concern and anxiety to the future of the peace process after Brexit. Later this month I will be visiting the Balkans – to describe all the conflicts in that region would require a many-hour lecture. The Greeks and Cypriots have worries of their own about their neighbour, not to mention the emotions surrounding illegal migration and the security of Europe's external border. I could go on.

I would like you to treat these words not as an introduction to some kind of sad prophecy. I don't feel good in the role of Cassandra. Out of Homer's heroes, I clearly prefer Ulysses, and in this case, not because of my fondness for Joyce. Ulysses, who pursued his goal, even against the gods. Sometimes losing his way, sometimes doubting and sinning, he finally made it to his Ithaca. Determination and faith were with him through the years of his journey. And despite moments of weakness and despite the crises, he never gave up. I can see this kind of strength and determination in you, the young Irish, and I meet people like you in all corners of Europe. All we need to do is find each other again, count how many we are and reunite. As I already said here in Dublin last year: *ní neart go cur le chéile*. There is no strength without unity.

This might seem a bit egoistic, but let me quote myself again. At the 60th anniversary of the Treaties which laid the foundations for the EU, I said in Rome, "Europe as a political entity will either be united, or will not be at all. Only a united Europe can be a sovereign Europe in relation to the rest of the world. And only a sovereign Europe guarantees independence for its nations, guarantees freedom for its citizens. The unity of Europe is not a bureaucratic model. It is a set of common values and democratic standards. Today it is not enough to call for unity and to protest against multiple speeds in Europe. It is much more important that we all respect our common rules such as human rights and civil liberties, freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, checks and balances, and the rule of law. This is the true foundation of our unity."

Recently, I have been thinking about the poet whose life embodies very well the various legacies I have just mentioned. Seamus Heaney, also honoured by this society, who would be 79 this week. An Irish poet from Derry in the North who came of age during The Troubles. A Nobel laureate with professorships at Harvard and Oxford. It was Heaney who welcomed the leaders of the Central and East European countries to the EU at a special ceremony in Dublin on the 1st of May 2004. His celebratory poem, *Beacons at Bealtaine*, uses the image of a feast of bright fire to mark the day we returned home:

*So on a day when newcomers appear*

*Let it be a homecoming and let us speak*

*The unstrange word, and give a welcome here,  
Move lips, move minds and make new meanings flare  
Like ancient beacons signalling, peak to peak,  
From middle sea to north sea, shining clear  
As phoenix flames upon fionn uisce here.*

Thank you.

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