

Speech by President Donald Tusk upon receiving the Globsec European Award

Thank you very much Mr Prime Minister for your compliments. I am not only a father but also a grandfather, time is running. My first passion was football, unfortunately I was not talented enough and that was the only reason why I became a politician.

I am very moved. Personally this is a very important moment. You know what Slovakia means to me not only as President of the European Council but also as a Pole, your friend, your neighbour.

First of all, I would like to express my warm thanks for honouring me with the Globsec European Award, at the end of my mission in Brussels. Leaving high office has its good sides. When you start your term, everyone looks at you with mistrust, and places high demands on you. In the middle of your term, they criticise you without mercy, and often do not hide their disappointment with you. By the end of your term everything changes. It's an interesting interdependence: the number of compliments you get is in inverse proportion to the number of days left till the end of your term.

I want to believe, however, that there is more to awarding me this prize than just cordial courtesy. My sincere cooperation with Globsec, and we met for the first time many years ago, is a common continued effort to work for the integration of Europe, as well as for the strong position of the countries of our region in Europe and in the European institutions. I was a co-author of this cooperation, and also its beneficiary, because without a strong and univocal support from the Slovaks and other countries of this region, I would never have been elected twice as President of the European Council.

Frankly speaking, it was our common interest, to have at the helm of the Council someone who is an ardent supporter of the European unity, and at the same time a genuine spokesman for the countries of Central Europe; who understands their interests, emotions, history and ambitions. As well as their fears and traumas. I remember, as if it were today, our meeting in Bratislava for the opening of the Slovak Presidency. Please allow me to repeat the words I had addressed to you at the time:

“The greatness of a country is not determined by its area, the greatness of a country is not determined by its population. Today we speak of Slovakian greatness not by measuring it in square kilometres, nor based on demographic statistics, but by evaluating the results of your work, determination, patience and your wisdom.

You have demonstrated those attributes since the beginning of your indeed challenging history. Thanks to them, you have built your independence and your position in Europe. You have shown everyone what it means to be proud. You asked no favours of anyone. You didn't want anything for free. You only demanded respect and understanding for your ambitions. Great, but justified

ambitions. And today you quite rightly enjoy the respect and recognition of all Europe, of all the international community.”

I spoke in Slovak then. I try to speak in national languages, when I visit the countries of the region. That was the case in Prague, in Zagreb, in Podgorica, Skopje, Sofia, Bucharest, and also in Kiev. Because my second obsession, alongside maintaining the European unity, was to find a balance between integration and a desire for sovereignty, so evident in our countries. It is understandable that we want to enjoy our independence and national sovereignty to the full – they are still so recent. I myself dedicated my young years to the independence of my home country, and so I feel exactly what you must feel. I also know, that there will be no sovereign countries of Central Europe without a united and integrated European Union. Whoever makes use of our pride and national ambition against the idea of a United Europe, also undermines the sovereignty of our countries. Because only Europe as a whole is able to face global challenges and dangers lurking in our immediate neighbourhood.

The federalists who dream about the disappearance of national states tend to be irritating, and the naivety of some of them can even be surprising, but it is in fact the nationalists who pose a greater threat to the sovereignty of our states. This may sound like a slogan, but there will be no sovereign and independent European nations without a sovereign and integrated Europe. The history of our region is the best proof, what kind of risks arise when our continent becomes a mosaic of conflicts and antagonistic interests, where it is difficult to agree even the most general and basic principles and values.

In 2017, as a guest of Globsec, I said that I was not afraid of different European speeds or different formats of cooperation. The essence of the Union is not threatened, just because some of its members integrate more slowly or more cautiously, for instance regarding common currency or Schengen. Also, I rather see advantages than threats coming from the fact that we gather in different formats, in terms of geography or objectives, such as the V4 format, for example.

The problem is not different speeds, but different directions and destinations. Europe, or in a wider perspective, a transatlantic community, has found itself today at a political crossroads. Until recently, we had been a political and axiological community, which was integrating and enlarging, while today it is starting to disintegrate and shrink. Brexit, the withdrawal of the US from many fields, like for example its latest decision to abandon Kurds in Syria, hesitations concerning accession talks with our Balkan partners, a demonstrative disregard by some of our Member States for fundamental principles such as the rule of law – all this is a sad illustration of the same trend: of shrinking and disintegration. That is why I am appealing to the citizens and politicians of our part of Europe: Take on your shoulders the responsibility not only for yourselves and for your interests, but also for Europe as a whole, for Europe as a community.

It only depends on you whether the European Union will survive this critical time and rebuild its self-confidence and determination. One may treat the Union as a cash cow and its values with a grain of salt and reservations.

Such an attitude may bring internal political benefits but it is only a very short-term game. Contemporary times demand from Central Europe maturity and strategic seriousness. We used to say of ourselves, we, the so-called "New Europeans", that we were the hope and future of the Union. The moment is coming when history will tell us "Check!" It would be good, if our words didn't turn out to be just a bluff. Thank you.