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Donald Tusk faces strong european challenges

The enlargement of the EU was of vital significance for Poland and other Central European countries (which does not mean it was neutral or negative for the Union - quite the contrary.) For these countries, rejoining Europe was a unique opportunity for social progression, bringing the prospect of long-term benefits. If the Central European countries had not joined Europe, they would by now have been marginalized even further, with all the negative political, economic and social consequences not just for them, but for the entire European continent. Without that membership, some of the candidate countries (including Poland) could have faced many more difficulties in confronting the challenges of the technological revolution and – increasingly global - competition. Politically, if Poland were to be squeezed between the (not enlarged) EU and Russia, its sovereignty and economy would be in serious jeopardy. Refusing or not being able to join Europe would have meant that Poland would have been left permanently on the periphery of Europe. Today's conflict between Russia and Ukraine proves that this line of reasoning was absolutely correct.

It was a unique possibility for Poland to modernize its economy as well as its social patterns, to alter ways of thinking and to enhance the social development, like the introduction of better ecological norms, better protection of consumers, higher quality of goods. However, significant progress achieved in all these domains, thanks to the EU support, did not protect Poland and other new member countries, to a lesser or greater extent, from all the consequences of the all-European crisis of today. Surprisingly, though many Poles do not accept the social inequalities and the marginalization of its 30-40% of citizens associated with the introduction of liberal economic model, only a few of them reject the integration with the European Union.

We should bear in mind that the Europe of today happens to be a very different place to what it was some 60 years ago when the EU founding members were slowly making their first steps on the road towards European integration. West European countries had plenty of time to adapt politically,

economically, socially and even mentally to the challenges of working together. Unlike “new” member countries which, once admitted to the EU after queuing almost 15 years in its antechamber, had no time to waste, nor had the chance to go through the evolutionary process of European consciousness-building. They had to catch-up.

When Poland joined the European Union, the old members feared it would be as terrorizing as Spain and Greece, as arrogant as France, as complicated as Italy, and as keen on opt-outs as the United Kingdom. Ten years later and they are more likely to come asking for advice. Helped by large amounts of EU funds, Poland has become an economic and political role model for the rest of the club, growing by almost 50% over the decade and largely avoiding the lapses into populism or authoritarianism of some of the others. So it is understandable that Donald Tusk, who oversaw much of Poland's progress as prime minister between 2007 and 2014, became the first politician from “new Europe” to move into one of the EU's top positions. As president of the European Council, where Europe's heads of government meet, it falls to Mr Donald Tusk to craft deals between 28 disputatious leaders.

Crisis in the euro zone, the dangerous conflict between Russia and Ukraine and the latest terrorist threats, have reignited discussions on the adequacy of the European integration model today as well as its capacity to confront serious challenges. In particular – how to revive, still valid, European values while sorting out the economic quagmire. And how to ensure a vision of the future under the pressure of short term difficulties while averting an understandable yet unfounded loss of trust in the future of the European endeavour among the elites and parts of the populace in the – mainly older - member countries. And how to prevent disillusionment in the new EU member states, still very supportive of European integration. Last but not least, how to enhance Europe's competitiveness and position, politically and economically, on the global scene in the post-American, or post-Western world, with its uncertainty and rapid change.

This heavy challenge to European solidarity shows that EU has arrived at the cross-roads: towards renaissance – or bankruptcy. Will, however, a weakening of Europe be in the interests of either the West, with its civil standards of democracy, human rights and free markets, or indeed the world as a whole? A strong united Europe is needed to maintain a sound balance on the world scene. Amid growing interdependence under globalization, avoiding a destructive rivalry among main country groups is a pre-condition of a peaceful future and the well-being of the planet. And the mutual solving of global problems encountered. A rejuvenated Europe should take responsibility towards its citizens and the international society by deepening integration and reaffirming its values which brought, and keep, European nations together, and strengthen the European identity.

Poland is near the heart of many of the challenges facing the EU, from restarting growth to the Russian threat in Ukraine to the British problem. Some of this is circumstantial: Ukraine is Poland's neighbor, Britain the top destination for its migrant workers (more than 1 million). In the early days Polish diplomacy was defensive, concerned with voting rights or the opening of foreign labor markets. That approach persists in occasional "zero-sum" distributional debates, such as those over the EU budget or climate-change policy, that tend to reinforce Europe's old east-west split. In both cases the Poles won reasonable deals, expanding the budget and gaining exemptions from climate rules.

Elsewhere the Poles have become skilled at wrapping diplomatic initiatives in European colors. The eastern partnership, an (ultimately doomed) attempt to bring the EU's eastern neighbors, such as Ukraine, into Europe's orbit without offering them membership, was the product of an odd but fruitful alliance between Poland and Sweden. Poland has learned to move between different groupings on different issues. The "Visegrad" club (Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia) is hopelessly split on Russia but united on the need for more cash from Brussels. The "Weimar triangle" (France, Germany and Poland) brings the Poles into the orbit of the EU's traditional powerhouses, even if it is more symbolic than substantial. The relationship with Germany is particularly strong, and rests on two pillars: a shared dedication to fiscal stewardship, and the business ties that have turned Polish

enterprises into important suppliers for German manufacturers.

Mr Tusk's predecessor, Herman Van Rompuy, served as a sort of therapist to the EU's leaders, listening to their concerns and finding common ground where it was available, particularly on economic matters. A different approach may be expected from Mr Tusk, who elbowed his way to the top of Polish politics, sometimes ruthlessly. When appropriate he is likely to make his own views clear, especially on foreign affairs. As a veteran of the anti-communist struggle he can speak authoritatively on the European aspirations of countries like Ukraine.

Poland's hardest challenges lie ahead. Since 2004 the country has banked the easy economic and political wins, spending EU cash on infrastructure projects and reaping the diplomatic fruits of accession. It must now find a new development model based on innovation rather than cheap labor, particularly as the EU money supply dries up. And as the euro zone integrates, the longer Poland hangs on to the national currency, the further it may drift from the policy-making core. This is a concern for ministers, for among Polish voters the euro lacks friends. Two years ago nobody expected the bloody war between aggressive Russia and pro-European Ukraine. We should not forget about the new dimension of the so called Islamist terrorism that has already threatened the societies of the UK, Spain, France, Belgium and Denmark.

As for Mr Tusk, his appointment tells a story not only about Poland but about the EU. He supports the euro but has struggled to win over voters. Despite Poland staying outside, he will chair euro group summits as well as European Councils, which will please those worried by the EU's divide between euro ins and outs. He also understands the Russian threat well. Indeed, it was the Ukraine crisis that persuaded him to take the job; just days before the decision in August he was thinking of abandoning his Civic Platform party a year before an election. Yet for all that, Mr Tusk's tools will be the multilateral ones of a committed European. In particular, he hopes that his "energy union" plan will weaken Russia's ability to play divide and rule among its European customers by creating a single buyer for Gazprom's supplies. The proposal was a Polish one but would resound to Europe's advantage.

The spirit of the European solidarity is now seriously weakened, not only due to the economic crisis, but especially by the Russia-Ukraine war. To succeed, it will be essential for people of the Old Continent to

become aware that it is up to them to make a crucial choice. They need to be persuaded that they bear a moral responsibility to support the right option and indicate their preference for such policies to their governments. Therefore, the time seems ripe for Europe (Europeans, heads of EU states/governments) to wake up from their dangerous lethargy, to abandon a bazaar mentality and make up their mind as to the right way forward: loose integration, i.e. going backward towards an eventual multidimensional break-up and collapse of the European Project, or the tightening of integration with a view not to aim at the superstate but, eventually, a federation that will ensure the Renaissance and reinvention of Europe, to make it ready to confront the challenges of the XXI century.

As long as the politicians and societies of member states have short memories and lack imagination, the prospect of the EU being marginalised would appear to have little impact. Should we wait for another large crisis to strike, or any external or internal threat to materialize before we agree – and act? The new presidency of Mr Donald Tusk could be an important point of departure towards new and fresh European thinking. It is not enough to hope for a good outcome, i.e. consolidation of the Union and regaining its solidarity, now in serious jeopardy. To avert a much worse scenario, an urgent joint educational effort has to be made to stop an increasing social indifference towards the grand and unique European Project. I strongly believe that a unified Europe and its solidarity do – in fact – serve the national interests of the EU member-states. It should continue. Lasting peace, the preservation of democracy within and among them, freedom of movement, of production factors and people and novel ideas, will greatly help – as it used to in the past – to enhance economic benefits, diminish unemployment and improve welfare throughout the European Union, with a positive impact globally as well. To this end, we need in the Union another *l'approfondissement*: more solidarity among member-states as the basis for further integration, also in political, economic and social terms. There is also a much neglected need to make the people of the

Old Continent feel Europeans as well as being Poles, Germans or Portuguese. Let the dramatic Maidan's example – of Ukrainians determined to join Europe – awaken dormant European patriotism. Without a strengthened and united EU, we can expect the worst — militarily and politically. The history of our continent looks like re-peating itself as a tragic farce in the XXI century. Frightening memories of the consequences of European nationalism 100 years ago, when the World War I started, seem to be revived eastward of Poland. An outstanding expert on the war, professor Margaret MacMillan warns that the circumstances seem to resemble those preceding that tragic event. This unwelcome and unsolicited challenge must not be ignored or underestimated by our European family.

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