

Speech by President Donald Tusk at VVD Europadag event, The Hague

First of all, I owe you an explanation of why I am here today. In fact, this is the very first time that I have been the guest of a party meeting since assuming office as President of the European Council on the 1st of December, last year. To tell you the truth, since my nomination, I haven't attended even one meeting organized by my own party, Civic Platform in Poland. I believe that in my present capacity, I have to be as impartial as possible. And frankly, as a party leader with a fifteen-year experience, I must confess that, as a rule, I was bored to death during party meetings. You are the only ones I am sharing this with, and I trust that you will be discreet.

So, why am I here? The reasons are quite simple. One year ago, Mark came to see me for a private visit to my home town, to Gdansk. When we went to the National Museum to see the famous painting by Hans Memling called "The Last Judgment", he told me that he had only one request of me. In Poland, a guest's wish is treated like an order, so of course I answered that I would do anything he wanted me to. To which he promptly asked the question: "Will you come to the Hague for our party meeting?" I was left with no choice. Incidentally, when we were admiring the great work by Memling, we had no idea that Europe, within a year, would come to resemble some bits of "The Last Judgment". If you remember the painting, you will know exactly what I have in mind.

There is also a second reason. As a Danziger of many generations, I am in some sense also a Dutchman. Mark himself seemed quite surprised at how much the old part of Gdansk reminded him of some of your towns. Come to think of it, nearly everything beautiful in Gdansk was built in the 16th and 17th centuries by the Dutch.

The third reason is perhaps the most important one. It is for your ears only and I kindly ask you to keep it a secret. I was born and will die a liberal.

Thirty five years ago when Solidarity was coming to life in Poland, together with a group of my friends from Gdansk we decided that our main goal was to inject as much reflection on freedom and liberalism as possible into this huge Catholic and national Trade Union movement. As you may guess, this wasn't easy.

From the very beginning, however, it was my conviction that the purpose of our fight against the Communist regime was to establish freedom, not just to overthrow the system. We set up an illegal periodical promoting fundamental principles of liberal thought that we called "the liberal minimum", in the belief that a future Poland must be built on the values contained in this "liberal minimum", that is: freedom of speech, political pluralism and democracy, the rule of law, private ownership, free competition, and the return to the Western political community. After forty years of Communism, it was not easy to persuade people of these ideas. What was needed were faith, determination, courage, and finally, political strength.

In those days, the liberals in my part of Europe frequently took pride in their powerlessness. You may remember the flagship essay by Vaclav Havel entitled "The Power of the Powerless". In those hopeless times, for simply writing the word "freedom", one could end up in jail, which was also my experience. The faith that liberalism could become a huge force for profound social change, almost revolution, seemed like pure illusion. The only thing that seemed possible then was a moral manifesto for freedom, and there was some sense in it. But we wanted something more. The establishment of the rule of freedom and law, and the re-structuring of the Communist economy. This required strength and political effectiveness, not only an ethical reflection. And we succeeded.

Since then, I have deeply believed that political liberalism doesn't have to be a synonym of weakness. Moreover, that the duty of all liberally-minded Poles, the Dutch and all Europeans, is to be strong, powerful and creative. This is why when the Polish transformation came to a critical moment, in the year 2000, I founded, bearing in mind my good experiences with Solidarity, the Civic Platform, a people's party of wide appeal, but with a liberal core, so that liberalism could remain the mainstream of Polish politics.

Your, and speaking more precisely, our common victory in Europe is that the "liberal minimum" has been accepted by a political family, wider than just the liberals. This minimum today is a foundation of a broad European centre with Social and Christian

Democrats, the Conservatives, of course the Liberals, and other moderate parties. Europe is ruled by liberalism, although not always by the Liberals, and this is why it is so often the target of attacks of our opponents and enemies, both inside and outside of Europe. They often call liberal Europe "decadent", but I feel, in fact I know, that there is no better alternative to it. Yes, Europe is ruled by liberalism, but it has not always been so, and may not be so in the future. It depends on us. We remember from the past that in the most dramatic moment in our history, at the end of the 1930s, the advocates of a liberal order gave up virtually without a fight, even though all the cards were in their hands. Ordinary people turned their backs on them, seeing how weak and hesitant they were. People didn't turn away from freedom, because they were fed up with it. No, they simply lost faith in the belief that the freedom camp was able to put a stop to evil, however they understood it. They no longer believed that the liberals were a guarantee of security. And I am sure you remember who took their place.

Today we are facing a major task restoring the confidence of ordinary people in the liberal, moderate centre. Here, speeches and declarations will no longer do. What people want from us both on the national and European levels, are decisions which will grant them a feeling of security again.

If we want Europe to continue on its path of solidarity, openness and freedom, we, the political leaders of many countries, cannot abdicate our most important duties, and to surrender our attributes of public authority. And the primary duty of public authority has always been to provide security for its own community, and to protect its own territory. Today, no task is more important for the moderate centrist political camp than the re-establishment of Europe's external borders. And not in order to make Europe into an inaccessible fortress, but to effectively protect the values I have just mentioned in solidarity, freedom and openness.

Only then will we be able to stop the radicals in their march for power. How we solve the migration crisis will be the key to the hearts and minds of our voters. This is the greatest challenge of today, to show that the liberal centre can be tough and determined in its action, also on our external borders. Not to become more like the right-wing populists, but to protect Europe against them.

It was the liberal minds that built the foundations of contemporary European civilization, based on freedom and tolerance. Today, we must prove together that we are able to save their legacy from irresponsible populism and brutal radicalism. And to tell you the truth, this is why I am here today. I am here today to say it loud and clear that Europe needs people like you, free, open and strong. And such leaders as Mark.

Thank you very much.

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