

15.05.2010

Polish prime minister calls for Europe to become a closer union

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk has won the 2010 Charlemagne Prize in Aachen. In an interview with Deutsche Welle he spoke about the future of the EU, about integration, expansion and the bloc's international role.

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk is the 2010 recipient of the Charlemagne Prize, an annual award that recognizes efforts in promoting European understanding. Tusk received the prize in Aachen on May 13, with the Charlemagne judges praising him for steering Poland away from nationalism and bringing the former Soviet-bloc country into the heart of Europe.

Deutsche Welle had a chance to speak with the prime minister about his vision for the future of the European Union and the issues surrounding the bloc: integration, expansion of the eurozone, shared defense and its international presence.

Deutsche Welle: In the words of the judges, you are "a convinced and a convincing European." What is your vision of Europe for Europeans, and also its dealings with the rest of the world?

Donald Tusk: For all those who understand the meaning of freedom, the meaning of human rights, the meaning of respect for tradition - for all those who have faith in themselves, in their own potential - Europe is, first and foremost, the best model for Europeans. Europe is understood as a union, the European Union - but it is also a continuing dream and a continuing challenge.

Sometimes, especially in the so-called old Europe, I hear doubting voices, that Europe is not proving itself; that times of crisis have shown that the European Union is not up to the challenges. And we, the Polish people, but also many other Europeans, reply that it is precisely at such critical moments that the idea of Europe, or the union of free people, who believe in their potential and in fundamental values, becomes the most attractive challenge.

And, as I have been repeating frequently over the last few weeks, the more difficult and painful our experiences, the more the doubting voices arise all around, the more we need to hold high the European flag, affirm the conviction that this is a phenomenal invention: the European family. We must repeat this all the louder and raise the rallying cry all the higher.

What should the model for the European Union be? A Europe of nation states, or the United States of Europe? Which should we aim for?

I think that, very often, discussion about the future of Europe is a discussion about banal, empty slogans. A moment of historic reflection and common sense is enough to understand that nations will remain nations; Poles will feel Polish. And Germans, German. The French, French. And so on.

This is as true about nations as it is about smaller ethnic groups. We shall remain true to our religions. We shall remain faithful to our customs, while at the same time being aware that Europe needs to be an ever closer union; it needs to think more effectively about its security, including energy security.

In the global world, a Europe divided by conflicting interests and conflicting values doesn't stand a chance. But a Europe that can rise above these differences while not negating them has a chance to become one of the key world powers, and that is our shared dream.

You say Europe should be more integrated, and you talk about Europe as a union of values and not merely a continent. Is further enlargement of the EU the way to steam ahead under the present circumstances? And, if so, should all the Balkan countries and Turkey become members of this united Europe?

The greatness of Europe has also been based on the fact that Europe has shown magnanimity and patience for those who wanted to participate – not in a mechanical, empty political union, but in a union which respects all these values, a union aware of what the foundations of Europe are. This is why I would direct the question about further enlargement of the European Union equally to Brussels, to the capitals of the European Union, as well as to the candidate countries themselves.

Right from the beginning, Poland has been in favor of the process of the enlargement of the European Union, without putting down any conditions of a political and organizational character. These have, in any case, been included in the treaties.

Nevertheless, we shall always be asking ourselves and other Europeans, as well as those who want to join the union, do you share our system of values? Do you want to participate in this union which takes responsibility for itself, where every person is ready to help another? And a union where solidarity or freedom are not mere empty slogans?

We shall ask these questions also of the Turks, Ukrainians and all those who apply to become members. But we have examples closer to home, in the sense of realistic possibilities, such as Croatia or Serbia. And it appears that under no circumstances can Europe become closed.

Even, if for Germany or for others, today's experience of Greece may be prompting us to think, let's be careful with those who don't live up to the crisis or who have not played by the book. But is it really the case that the core European countries have always played by the book? Is it really the case that some can point their finger and say, we are fit to be in [the union], but you are not fit? Everybody has to do their homework on this crisis, everybody, without any exceptions.

The eurozone is wobbly. And even, possibly, falling apart at the seams. Although you are not obliged to, you want to help Greece. Are you still keen for Poland to join the common currency, to adopt the euro, as soon as possible?

Just as is the case for the European Union, so it is for the eurozone: it shouldn't be a club for the countries which have joined, but then each one will do as it likes. The eurozone cannot afford for the grim experience of the recent months to be repeated ever again.

Poland wants to become a member of the eurozone as soon as possible by fulfilling the criteria which have been agreed to by all. Today, we point our finger at the Greeks or talk about possible problems for other Mediterranean countries, but we all remember that even the most stable of the union's members which also belong to the eurozone also have a case to answer when it comes to fulfilling the criteria and sticking to fiscal discipline.

In just over a year, Poland will take over the presidency of the European Union. For six months, your hand will be at the helm of the EU. What ideas will you be especially keen to 'sell' to Europe? What will matter to you the most?

We live in the European Union under the Lisbon Treaty. This is not the time nor place to explain all the aspects of the treaty, and I am a sober and common-sense politician and I know well that the presidency is very important, but the European Union has its powers that be. Poland has a positive role to play during its presidency, but my common sense prompts me to say that the decisions will not be mine to take. I will be jointly responsible, and not the one who makes the decisions.

It has been just over a month since the death of President Lech Kaczynski and 95 outstanding Poles. It was a difficult time for Poland, which also brought hope for a Polish-Russian reconciliation. What can Poland and Russia, acting together, offer to Europe?

First of all, this greatest of tragedies that the world has seen, when it comes to the death toll of government elites, shook to the core our minds and our hearts. A genuine sense of mourning was pervasive in Poland. But it did not shake the country.

Everybody watched with admiration how Poles and the Polish nation coped with the turn of events. And we are really trying to draw positive conclusions for the future from this tragedy. Also political ones. Also regarding improving relations between Poland and Russia, because they are the key to good relations between Europe and Russia.

Such were my aims also before the catastrophe, but both my aims and the efforts of the Russian leaders, which I appreciate, have acquired a sense of urgency precisely due to the catastrophe. Therefore, if this is to be the legacy of those who died in the crash near Smolensk, then maybe the most important thing is that this legacy becomes a positive factor in furthering understanding - rather than conflicts - between nations.

Interview: Marcin Antosiewicz

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