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Polish universalism

A strong element of political universalism is characteristic of few European nations. The oldest and most obvious is the political heritage of Germany, which, since the proclamation of the Holy Roman Empire in the 10th century, carried the idea of Europe's political unity for eight hundred years. This German universalism was emblazoned, for example, by Dante in the famous stanzas of *The Divine Comedy*, in which the tragic figure of Emperor Henry VII is apotheosised. To a large extent, German universalism has determined the course of European history from the earliest times, shaping the well-known, and sometimes troublesome for other nations, German sense of responsibility for the entire continent. Without understanding the nature of this German phenomenon, it is essentially impossible to grasp what the European Union is and how it operates today.

Only slightly younger are two other European universalisms, dismissed as insignificant due to being peripheral: Scandinavian and Polish. Historically, they are rooted in the period of great transition between the Middle Ages and the modern era. Two 14th-century unions – the Scandinavian one, agreed at Kalmar Castle in Sweden, and the Polish-Lithuanian one, entered into at the Kreva Castle in Belarus – mark the beginnings of these two universalisms, crucial to the shape of Europe. To this day, the Kalmar Union remains a reference point for the deep sense of political solidarity that we see among Scandinavians on a daily basis. Meanwhile, the Union of Krevo, a political welding of Poles, Ukrainians, Belarusians and Lithuanians, created the most enduring state in Central and Eastern Europe, lasting for four centuries.

The phenomenon of this union statehood was that it imposed on large parts of Eastern Europe (as far as today's Donbas over which a bloody war is being fought) a political order that was unusual for the time, based on noble democracy, the rule of law and religious tolerance. From a historical perspective, we can say that the very existence of this union state 'pushed' the eastern Tatar despotisms, that had subjugated the whole of Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages, and the nascent Muscovite autocracy to the farthest frontiers. Simultaneously, the political and military power of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (as the citizens of the time called their state) created for a long time a kind of 'security zone' that allowed the civilisational development of Central and Eastern Europe. In the 18th century, when this union state lost its ability to guarantee the safety of its vast territory, a common historical catastrophe occurred for Poles, Ukrainians, Belarusians and Lithuanians. For the many years that followed, all these peoples fell under the rule of tyrannies that not only knew nothing of the idea of individual freedom but also used violence to destroy the subjugated nations and deprive them of their identity.

Regardless of the disputes and civil wars that the four united peoples have fought throughout history, those four centuries have shaped their national characters. They gave rise to the Polish *Solidarity* movement, which played a key role in shaping Europe's new identity at the end of the 20th century, as well as to the current heroic defence of Ukrainian freedom against new Moscow's onslaught. The nations that once formed the vast Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth have learned over the centuries that they may simply cease to exist if they fail to defend themselves against the constant threat from the East. That is why their contemporary political aspiration is to rebuild the former 'security zone' that their common statehood once ensured. Without this aspiration, the success of Poland's and Lithuania's efforts to join NATO in the 1990s would not have been possible, especially as there was perhaps a false impression at the time that peace in Europe was permanent and that Moscow was finally converging with the West. Nor, without this aspiration, would President Zelensky be now calling persistently for the ever-closed doors of the Western alliance to be opened to Ukraine.

All in all, the invaluable legacy of that union state is the strong Eastern European universalism that has now been revived. It is no coincidence that the crucial moment for the Ukrainians to finally decide to

throw off Russian rule was when a Moscow-friendly president tried to block their country's association with the European Union. That is the genesis of the Euromaidan 2013 and the subsequent Moscow invasion. It is indeed rare and distinctive that a country fighting for its national independence should, at the same time, demonstrate such a strong desire to participate in the supranational political order created by democratic Europe and America after the Second World War. Indeed, it is precisely the experience of the former supranational republic that tells Ukrainians that without some kind of universalist security order in Eastern Europe, a free Ukraine may once again prove to be an impermanent entity, a 'seasonal state'.

As for Poland, one could paraphrase Thomas Mann and apply to the Poles what that great writer wrote about his German people: "A thing that is Polish, in particular, means a thing that is beyond Polish". Polish universalism is somewhat akin to German universalism, except that it always looks to the east of Europe. In the Polish tradition, this style of political thought is sometimes called 'Prometheism'. According to this belief, widespread in Poland for centuries, Polish security is the same as the security of the whole of Eastern Europe. This essentially pragmatic conviction is expressed in the famous traditional Polish motto, 'For our freedom and yours'.

Hence, for Poles, there is no more important question in European politics today than whether Eastern Europe, and Ukraine in particular, will finally be included in the Euro-Atlantic security zone as a result of the ongoing war. After all, the Western Alliance is carrying out the same mission of security and civilisational development that the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, a union of Poles, Ukrainians, Belarusians and Lithuanians, carried out in previous centuries. Let us therefore say this very clearly: If, as a result of the current war, this American-European alliance guaranteeing freedom and security is not extended eastwards, it will be a historic defeat for the entire Eastern European universalism. In such a case, not only Ukraine but also Poland would have lost this war catastrophically in terms of their political future – regardless of how the military action developed.

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