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Freedom and equality of nations are the only defence against the threat of imperialism

Russia's aggression against Ukraine marked the end of an era in the history of Europe dominated by a conviction that another great war on the continent cannot happen given the traumatic experiences of the 20th century, while all European nations share a desire for peace. Faced with a tragic turn of events, we have come to realise that imperialism is not just a historical category but the lifeblood of the modern world affecting each of us, however differently, with its destructive power. Moreover, it has also become clear that imperialism cannot be integrated with the free world on a permanent basis, let alone in a harmonious way, by turning a blind eye to imperialistic ambitions, inclinations, or mere habits, by assenting to reasoning and acting in terms of spheres of influence, or by acknowledging historical entitlements or particular economic interests of the most powerful states.

As such, Russia's aggression against Ukraine came to be a wake-up call for Europe and spurred a thorough reflection on its future. As is inherent of any such reflection, a debate has ensued, encouraged by Chancellor Olaf Scholz of the Federal Republic of Germany pointing to the European Union as the antithesis of imperialism and calling for its substantial reinforcement in the present strategic reality by expanding the scope of decisions made by majority vote and dispensing with the right to veto. Such a solution would give way to the assumption of leadership by Germany in recognition of responsibility for our continent in the face of an imperialistic threat.

Drawing on its history of falling prey to its neighbours' imperialism and on the country's own anti-imperialistic tradition and political thought, Poland in particular is entitled and obliged to engage in the debate. The said political thought, based on a conviction that all people and nations are free and equal, has been encapsulated in some of the most straightforward catchphrases passed down through generations over the centuries: "The free with the free, the equal with the equal!"; "Nothing about us without us!"; "For our freedom and yours!". Adam Jerzy Czartoryski conveyed their essence in plain yet utterly meaningful words when he wrote in 1830: "Any independent nation – like an individual in the common order – has the right to have its own government and to build

social happiness the way it sees fit. No other nation, therefore, not being in a position to rule the former, much less to consider it its property or tool, has the right to interfere in what it deems good for the development of its own domestic prosperity and well-being. Under no pretext can foreign intervention forcibly impose a common system, which is against nature and law, to turn two different nations into single society.”

From Poland’s standpoint, it is imperative for today’s Europe to defend the freedom and equality of both individuals and nations in virtually every corner of the continent. In Ukraine, the Ukrainian people should be free to choose their identity, political system, political affiliations and military alliances, and to decide when to continue fighting for independence and when to sit down to negotiations with Russia. Their freedom means also sovereign equality towards any other sovereign state, equivalent to inalienability of Ukraine’s territorial integrity. That freedom and equality of Ukraine requires comprehensive political, diplomatic, economic, and especially military support by providing the country with the means to effectively defend its independence.

Sham support or no support at all boils down to sheer adherence to the imperialistic thesis that nations do not enjoy equal statehood, moral status and protection under international law, while their fate, condition, or position can be determined by empires or concerts of powers. For the principle of freedom and equality of nations to be universal and respected with regard to all European nations, Ukraine must win with our support, whereas Russian imperialism must be stopped and overpowered.

Still, the bid to stop and overpower imperialism in Europe must not come down to the relations between Russia and Ukraine, or between Russia and other countries it has deprived of their territorial integrity by orchestrating endless or “frozen” conflicts, such as Moldova or Georgia. But pursuits to dominate one’s partners, impose one’s arguments on them, disregard their rights, interests and needs, or pay no attention to their protests – in a word, the imperialistic tendencies – have often been seen in the European Union, too. What is more, hardly anyone with a closer insight into the Union’s reality would agree that a shortage of the most powerful member states’ aspirations to hold sway is among European integration’s primary insufficiencies. Similarly, it would be difficult to find anyone ready to claim that domination efforts are an effective barrier against Russian imperialism penetrating the EU. Therefore, if we agree on the necessity of reforming the EU’s decision-making process, the said reform

should be aimed at curbing the domination efforts by generating favourable conditions for authentic freedom and equality of member states, and thus taming any imperial aspirations and practices.

It is so because, contrary to common belief, international organisations themselves are not an antithesis of imperialism. An international organisation can only become one if founded on freedom and equality of all its member states. In other words, when all its structural institutions and practice, political initiatives and economic ventures are focused on the above mentioned freedom and equality. Hence, any deficit of freedom and equality of EU member states, whatever its form, makes the Union particularly vulnerable when confronted with Russia's imperialism, as the latter has nothing to offer besides its own model of politics and *modus operandi*. While looking for partners of substantial economic or demographic potential, preferably backed by their own model of imperial policy implemented throughout history, Russian imperialism offers a privileged form of economic and political cooperation. In other words, imperialism offers transformation of the continent to its likeness and image, that is to the concert of powers with Russia's own share and jointly defined spheres of influence.

So what are the reasons of the EU member states' deficit of freedom and equality that paves the way for imperial threats? The largest deficit of freedom is evidenced by increasingly common decision-making through majority vote, which causes the Union members' inequality to grow. Small and medium-sized states, who are disproportionately less capable of building effective coalitions, including blocking coalitions, are doomed to lose when attempting to defend their rights, interests or needs on their own. And when outvoted, their fate is decided by others, which means that their freedom is fundamentally violated. This is because freedom is about being subject to the law that we make ourselves by the power of our own will. By being subject to the provisions of this law, we are subject to our own will and therefore remain free.

The deficit of equality, in turn, is most clearly revealed by the imbalance across the euro area, where the fiscal and economic imbalances are being ossified. Since some of the states adopted the common currency, they have not been able to develop sustainably and harmoniously, while others run a permanent export surplus, counteracting the appreciation of their own currency thanks to the continuing economic stagnation in other states. It

is therefore a system that radically reduces an essential component of equality – equality of opportunity.

The deficit in freedom and equality boils down to the consolidation of institutional and functional division of states into larger and the largest, not only with an unquestionable economic advantage and demographic potential, but also with a voting power in the EU's decision-making process, which small and medium-sized states are unable to counterbalance even by acting together. The permanence and practical inviolability of this division leads to the systemic, political, and economic domination of the former over the latter. This domination, in turn, opens the way for the intensification of the national interests of the dominant states at the expense of the dominated ones. The guarantee for the success of this process is that the dominant states generally have the unquestioned ability to present and define their own particular national interests as the common good of all European Union member states.

It is a condition that provides fertile ground for both the endeavours of Russian imperialism and imperial practices within the European Union itself.

Nord Stream serves as a spectacular case study. Accepting the offer of permanent access to cheaper Russian gas was supposed to provide a competitive advantage in the common market in exchange for informal acceptance of the Russian sphere of influence in the post-Soviet area. Bridging the gap between the core political interests of Russian imperialism and the economic ambitions of the most powerful state in the European Union has led to its permanent transformation towards an imperialist *modus operandi*. Gaining a dominant market position came at the expense of not only undermining the level playing field but also of European economies becoming dependent on Russian supplies of energy sources and the security interests of some EU member states and Ukraine. Political cooperation with Russia was preferred also at the cost of loyalty to allies, especially those most exposed to Russian imperialistic claims at NATO's eastern flank. All these actions were not a coincidence but the result of a deliberately, purposefully and consistently pursued strategy that was presented as a purely economic European project with economic benefits for all, that is to say, part of the common good of the member states.

But when, as a result of Russian aggression against Ukraine, this strategy now collapsed, the common good has been redefined as European

solidarity. The end of Germany's competitive advantage in the common market has resulted in a proposal—insisted on by Germany—that all member states voluntarily cut their gas consumption by 15%, including those countries that have persistently warned their European partners against becoming dependent on Russia.

Another important illustration of imperial practices within the EU is the case of Greece. Since the creation of the euro zone, the German economy has maintained a positive trade balance while the economy of Greece (as well as those of other South European countries) has struggled with stagnation, declining competitiveness and, as a consequence, rising debt. But even so, the single currency has been presented as beneficial for all eurozone countries and as their common good. The economic crisis in 2010 revealed the dialectic nature of this good. The common good was the success of foreign lending, chiefly by German financial institutions, and exports, also by predominantly German companies. During the crisis the common good turned out to involve passing all costs of a faulty system that stimulates the indebtedness of Europe's South on to the Greeks—despite the fact that the debt problem of all South European countries is only the other side of the booming German exports.

Thus, today's European order, EU order, does not protect us from the erosion of freedom and equality of the member states, a trend which, as experience has shown, is conducive to the rebirth of imperialism. In this context, the proposal to create institutional conditions for Germany to assume a leading role in the European Union would only substantially exacerbate this lack of freedom and equality. Accordingly, if the German offer is to defend the EU from imperialism, which Germany feels responsible to do, the Union does not need German leadership but German self-limitation. Only then will that freedom and equality of the member states enable the EU to become the desired antithesis of imperialism.

Just as imperialism poses a fundamental threat to the European Union, so too, its effective defence requires fundamental reforms. Therefore, the freedom of the member states requires, in principle, a radical strengthening of the European consensus and acknowledging it as a cornerstone of EU action and cooperation. Equality between the member states requires the restoration of equal opportunities for their development, which in turn must lead to a reform of the eurozone. The radicalism of this reform must not, a priori, preclude any solution such as

a systemic and partial debt relief for some eurozone members or either temporary or permanent return to their national currencies. Moreover, the reform momentum and direction of changes should come from the member states themselves and not from EU institutions. It is on those states to present and define the common good, that is to say, the principles of the well-being and development of all of them and, consequently, to determine the respective spheres of competence of those institutions. Furthermore, the reform effort must be based on the premise that those who have been affected by imperialist policies should contribute more to an effective defence against imperialism than those who have themselves practised it in the past.

If we fail to undertake such a reform, if we do not defend the idea and practice of freedom and equality of nations vis-à-vis imperial threats, we will help bring about intellectual and political backsliding compared with the centuries of Europe's progress and legacy.

For that reason, we are confronted with an existential challenge, one which is by no means a novelty in Europe's experience. At the dawn of our era, a dilemma also had to be resolved whether Rome should remain a republic of free and equal citizens or take over the characteristics of the Hellenist monarchies that neighboured it. Those who defended the republic aptly warned that Rome would ultimately not survive such a Hellenist imperial transformation. Their warning is worth remembering today.