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Excellencies,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for the invitation to speak on what I believe to be one of the greatest perils in history: imperialism.

I am told there is a suite in this building dedicated to Joseph Conrad. I'm glad he could afford to come here. He mentions this hotel in one of his novels.

He's widely recognized as one of the most influential English-language writers of all times, perhaps not everybody knows that Conrad was actually Polish by birth. Conrad was his first name, his surname was Korzeniowski. He lived in this not so distant era, when great powers competed for dominion over the world.

His homeland was at that time part of the Russian empire. Conrad experienced first-hand the heavy hand of Russian imperialism, when his father was imprisoned for taking part in one of our hopeless anti-Russian uprisings. Later, as a seaman of the British merchant navy, he witnessed the apex of colonialism in Asia and Africa. "*Heart of Darkness*" as you probably know, was inspired by

a trip to the Congo, and then “*Apocalypse Now*” was inspired by “*Heart of Darkness*.”

Through one of his characters he gave this bitter judgement on Western empires’ actions:

“The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion, or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much.”

Ukrainian victims, of course, have the same complexion as the Russian aggressors. But that did not stop Vladimir Putin from denying them the right to their own country, just as it did not stop previous Russian leaders from denying the same right to dozens of nations around Russia’s periphery.

If you want to know more about how Russia has tried to conquer and russify Ukraine before, you would be very well advised to read my wife’s book called “*The Red Famine*.”

In the 19th century, Ukrainian language was actually banned in Russia, and in the 1930s, Stalin created an artificial famine in which 5 million people died, and 200,000 bearers of Ukrainian culture were exterminated physically.

On February 24th 2022, imperialism struck again in the form of bombs falling on Ukrainian homes, kindergartens, schools and hospitals. Many people died, even more fled. They have been fleeing and dying ever since. Particularly right now, there is an aerial onslaught on Ukraine for a succeeding day as we speak.

Vladimir Putin – the leader of the by far the largest country on Earth – attacked a neighbor, demanding even more land. You see, Vladimir Putin has a business model that is exactly opposite to

that of Singapore. You are a small country with no natural resources and you've managed to make your people prosperous and influential. He has a very large country with huge natural resources and he's managed to impoverish his people, which sounds absurd to me. Russia has plenty of land in which to invest its resources, it doesn't need anybody else's. So what did provoke him, or drive him to start the biggest war in Europe since 1945?

For months before the invasion countless experts and Western politicians argued that the threats coming from the Kremlin were all a bluff. That Putin was "pragmatic". One Western diplomat I know believed it so much that he was actually in Kyiv on the day of the invasion persuading Ukrainians they have nothing to fear. He had to be evacuated.

I came to the conclusion the invasion was imminent already in August 2021. I was a Member of the European Parliament back then and did not have access to any privileged intelligence.

But I read newspapers and I came across Vladimir Putin's long essay in which – by unbearably twisting and reinterpreting historical facts – he argued that the Ukrainians were in fact Russians and that Ukraine had no right to sovereignty or even existence beyond being regional folklore. Then I learnt that he ordered the essay to be read by all professional Russian soldiers, and I asked myself: why would you do that? And I knew the invasion was coming.

History – or to be more precise – a historical narrative is a powerful weapon.

It can shape people's worldview and thus their actions.

It can bring nations together but it can also drive them apart.

It can calm troubled waters of international relations but it can also start a massive storm.

A powerful tool, that in the wrong hands can instill hatred, start wars, and justify murder and extermination.

I'd like to address one particular excuse for the launch of this invasion, because I know that the narratives are spread, particularly in the so-called Global South. I know it's a controversial concept, but you know what I mean. Namely that somehow, president Putin was provoked to invade Ukraine because of NATO's enlargement.

Let me just give you a few dates.

1991. The Soviet Union is still in existence. In Ukraine, they have a referendum on independence. They vote *for* independence, including in Donbas, including in Crimea, and I'm proud that Poland was the first country to recognize Ukraine as an independent state.

Then we have 1993. Important date. Which was the first country to give Ukraine guarantees of its independence and inviolability of borders? The Russian Federation, in the Budapest Memorandum, under which Ukraine gave up the third largest nuclear arsenal in the world. The signatories of this memorandum were the Russian Federation, the United States, UK, and tangentially France and China.

2004. Guess whose signature is on the treaty after the delineation of the state border between Ukraine and the Russian

Federation? Who signs the treaty and then also ratifies the treaty? Vladimir Putin.

2007. President Putin makes a speech at the Munich Security Conference, which is hostile to the West, but which for the first time publicly says that Ukraine is an artificial country, perhaps not long for this world.

2008. I was there in Bucharest, at the NATO Summit, as was president Putin. You see, we supposedly didn't embrace Russia enough. So why was president Putin at the NATO summit? He was late, as he always was, keeping everybody waiting 45 minutes. Why was he there? Because he was part of the Afghan coalition of NATO with other countries. And what does he do? He makes another speech, saying that Ukraine is an artificial creation, perhaps not long for this world.

2014. President Yanukovich changed the Ukrainian constitution. What does the new version of the constitution say? That Ukraine is a non-aligned country, barred from joining military alliances. And what does president Putin do? He does the *Anschluss* of Crimea, taking over the sovereign territory of another country, even though Ukraine was unable to join NATO.

Then, of course, you have the opposite example of Sweden and Finland joining NATO. If, in theory, wishing to join NATO meant that you had to be invaded by Russia, why is Russia not invading Finland and Sweden?

Every war of aggression is always started supposedly in self-defense, and Russia should know about it. When the Wehrmacht crossed into the Soviet Union under the Barbarossa Plan in June 1941, the Soviet ambassador was summoned to the German

foreign ministry and was told that Germany was invading the Soviet Union “in self-defense.” Poland was also invaded “in self-defense.”

If you remember, at the beginning of the Ukraine war, the Americans managed to preempt some of the provocations that were planned so that Russia would be provided for a *casus belli* “in self-defense.” There is no “self-defense” reason to invade another country.

No, Putin didn’t invade Ukraine because Ukraine was going to join NATO, because it wasn’t approaching NATO in any way. Putin invaded Ukraine because he wants Ukraine. It’s a dictator’s ego trip. Sergei Lavrov said publicly that president Putin now has three key advisors: Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, and Catherine the Great. These were not exactly peaceful people. But a dictator’s ego trip is not a legitimate cause, a pretext, for war.

In the days around the invasion, a Kenyan ambassador to the United Nations made a very powerful speech, which inspired me to make my own speech at the Security Council earlier this year. In this speech, he said, “Western colonialists left us in Africa with borders that are crazy, that don’t respect any ethnic, historic, or geographical realities. On independence, we had a choice: either to start to correct that, and that would have been a recipe for perpetual war of everybody against everybody against everybody else, or just to live with the borders that we inherited.”

It’s no different in Asia or in Europe. Give me one nation state’s border, which is not an island, that is not artificial. United Kingdom is an island, and yet, the border of the United Kingdom is artificial, actually.

We fought two bloody world wars, particularly the second one, which was started on the pretext of coming to the assistance of your compatriots on the other side of an international border. We have established a taboo that you may not do that. If you have a problem with the treatment of your national minority, you go to the UN. You go to the Council of Europe. You invoke the Council of Europe's Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, which says that minorities have the right to their language being taught in school, double signs on roads, official language in courts, and so on. You are in your right to demand all that. What you're not allowed to do is to send in tanks. This taboo needs to be reestablished, or else there will be trouble. Not only in Europe.

Poland and Singapore are two nations that have proven they know how to make good use of the freedom that we've gained after colonial overlordship. Over the past decades we have tried to make our citizens better off, while simultaneously contributing to the development of our respective regions.

These success stories would not have been possible without the greater framework that we all benefited from: the rules-based international order which replaced the imperialist powerplay.

We all had our grievances and unsettled disputes but we collectively decided to work together in spite of them. Respect for sovereignty and national borders, freedom of trade and navigation, peaceful resolution of disputes allowed for a global cooperation and progress on an unprecedented scale.

It is in our countries' best interest to keep that order in place.

We must recognize its basic principles:

- respect for territorial integrity of sovereign states within internationally recognized borders;
- rule of law;
- and open economic cooperation on a level-playing field.

Only such systems can provide every country – no matter its size – with the right to choose its own path to prosperity. This is exactly what the Ukrainians are now fighting for: the ability to choose their own destiny. And this is exactly what we should all advocate. Because we all live in the vicinity of powerful and sometimes unpredictable states with global ambitions.

By supporting Ukraine we are not only aiding a victim of an unprovoked aggression. We are defending the principles of the UN Charter that we benefit from.

Today, these principles are at a breaking point. While the past 80 years have seen numerous conflicts, never before has a permanent member of the UN Security Council challenged the statehood of a sovereign nation, or attempted to alter internationally recognized borders. If such actions are left unchallenged, the security of many small and medium-sized states will be at risk.

An imperialist's victory in one place of the world will embolden imperialists around the world.

Therefore, in order to retain the right to tread our own path we must prevent revisionist powers from breaking the rules and destroying the system based on international law.

It might be a flawed and outdated system, but the answer to these weaknesses is reform, not war.

A great Polish poet and a Nobel Prize laureate, Czesław Miłosz, once wrote, and this can apply to smaller countries:

“An avalanche can change its run depending on pebbles on the ground”¹.

Your world-renowned Prime Minister, the late Lee Kuan Yew, wisely argued that:

“A nation is great not by its size alone. It is the will, the cohesion, the stamina, the discipline of its people and the quality of their leaders which ensure it an honorable place in history.”

Today, the weight of history is upon us yet again. All we need to do is to act together. While some are calling for a return to isolationism, what we actually need is precisely the opposite – more international solidarity. Hiding away has never stopped a rogue power.

Imperialism in Europe, in South America, in Africa, and here in Asia has always rewarded the few and oppressed the many. Multilateralism – imperfect as it is – is the only viable and just alternative for the global community.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The war in Ukraine is not some regional squabble. It is a brutal colonial war with global consequences, in which over a million people have already been killed or injured. Mind my words, if Putin were to conquer Ukraine, other leaders with imperial

¹ „Lawina bieg od tego zmienia po jakich toczy się kamieniach”. [tłum. Ł.P.]

ambitions would follow. And they would come up with their own historical justifications for territorial claims.

We have seen this movie before, and we know how it ends. But we are not doomed to play in the sequel. History will repeat itself only if we allow it. We shouldn't.

Thank you very much.