

Pour l'Europe. La Pologne et La France – une Alliance Indispensable au XXI^e siècle
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Mesdames et Messieurs les Ministres

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Chers amis français,

Thank you for inviting me again.

The first thing I did on arriving in Paris this afternoon was, of course, to visit Notre-Dame. You know all about its significance in French history but you may not know it also features in ours. It was at Notre-Dame, on September 10th 1573 that Prince Henry Valois took the oath to abide by a set of principles which came to be called Henrician Articles. They were unchangeable super-laws, in effect a written constitution, which obliged the King to consult with the parliament on a regular basis, to consult with a council of senior senators, guaranteed religious freedom and barred the King from waging war without the nobility's consent. Only then could he come to Poland and assume the crown as our first elected king. Those regulations – very modern for their age – were in effect for over 200 years but eventually succumbed to corruption and paralysis. Our reforms came too late and the neighboring powers – Austria, Prussia and Russia – were ready to take advantage. Failure to adapt to changing circumstances wiped Poland off the map for well over a century.

It is a history lesson we should all bear in mind as we navigate through these times of great disruption.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As some of you might remember, I spoke to this conference once before, 12 years ago. I have re-read my speech.

Alas, some things haven't changed.

I talked then of an increasingly unstable international order. Different crises here in Europe. Strategic shifts in American policy. But we didn't address one issue adequately: Russia's greedy imperial ambitions.

Putin's aggression against Ukraine has shaken the international order. It undermined our collective security. Once again, Europe must face a violent threat coming from the east.

We need to collaborate as we have collaborated many times before.

At the beginning of the 19th century, young Poles flocked to join Napoleon's army. They dreamed of restoring an independent Poland. They fought alongside the French in Italy, Spain and Russia and also - again it might be news to you - in Haiti. Two demi-brigades, about 6000 men, were sent there to restore colonial rule. Remarkably, many of them could not bring themselves to fight another nation struggling for independence. In recognition of their help they were later awarded Haitian citizenship and - alongside the Germans - they became the only whites allowed to buy land in Haiti. These privileges, written in the Haitian constitution, were suddenly revoked over 150 years later. Why? Because in 1974 at the football World Cup Poland demolished Haiti seven-nil. As Pope John Paul II once said "out of all the unimportant things, football is the most important."

But back to Napoleon. One hundred thousand Polish soldiers, more than 16 percent of the combined French forces, took on the Russians during the disastrous campaign of 1812. Marching on Moscow was a disastrous mistake. Had Napoleon not attacked Russia and instead limited himself to helping Poles restore their own state, he would have gained a reliable ally to protect the eastern flank. The threat from Moscow might have been pushed back for longer and Cossacks would never have reached Paris. He might have never visited St Helena and France might have remained a superpower for longer.

Perhaps drawing the right lesson at last, France backed Polish efforts to put their country back on the map not only diplomatically, but in practice. In June 1917 a Polish army in France was created by the decree of President Raymond Poincaré. Some of its soldiers crossed the Atlantic from the United States to join the fight. The seventy-thousand-strong corps was known as the Blue Army of General Haller.

Alongside Haller's troops, a young French captain arrived in Poland. His name? Charles de Gaulle.

In 1919 and 1920, a 400-strong French military mission was operating in Poland. Its task: to advise the newly-formed Polish army.

In the summer of 1920, Lenin's Bolshevik hordes advanced on Warsaw. They aimed to spread Soviet communism across Europe. Imagine what a disaster that would have been.

They were driven back by the Polish army that operated French tanks and aircraft.

The significance of this battle and of France's assistance was obvious. In 1921, Józef Piłsudski, the architect of Polish independence, took off his own uniform the order of Virtuti Militari and personally decorated Marshal Foch with Poland's highest military decoration. One of the main streets in my home city of Bydgoszcz bears the Marshal's name to this day.

In 1922 Charles de Gaulle was awarded the Virtuti Militari Cross. In 1923, the President of Poland awarded Foch the rank of Marshal of Poland, a title commemorated on his catafalque at Les Invalides.

Just two decades later, Germany and Russia were at it again, with Hitler and Stalin initially trying to share the world between them. Let's remember the diplomatic game

that preceded the invasion of Poland in 1939. Hitler demanded the ceding of Gdansk and an extraterritorial corridor to East Prussia as a test of Poland's willingness to join his anti-Comintern axis. Poland could have accepted Hitler's demands and defer the start of the war. Had we done so, Hitler had every intension to attack France first. We stayed loyal to the Franco-Polish treaty and accepted the British guarantee. Polish authorities calculated that by putting up the fight they will create a golden opportunity for France to take pre-emptive action against Germany, thus engaging Hitler on two fronts right from the start. They believed that Britain and France would do what was clearly in the own best interest. They miscalculated - the second front was only opened 5 years later - but they were not wrong. Please admit that it would have been better to stand up to a madman in power sooner - not only for Poland and for France but for all of mankind.

After the war, as the Western allies were celebrating the V-Day, the nations of Central Europe saw the Iron Curtain fall, stranding us on the wrong side. We resisted, of course. During the long years of Soviet rule, France became a safe haven for so many Polish writers, artists, intellectuals and journalists.

Poland is forever grateful for France's support for our cause over this period!

By helping us bring the Iron Curtain down you helped millions of Central Europeans and the cause of freedom.

You helped France as well.

Three decades of Poland's remarkable economic growth have produced new opportunities for Poles but also for French and other international companies.

Today we host 1,200 French businesses which have created around a quarter of a million jobs. French entrepreneurs have invested 25 billion euros, ranking France second only to Germany in foreign capital involved in Poland.

In 2023 our bilateral trade exceeded 35 billion EUR. The value of French goods exports exceeded 13 billion EUR. That's a 3-fold increase compared to 2003, a year before Poland joined the EU. In recent years French companies operating in Poland earned almost 2 billion euros in annual profits.

So I'm confident in encouraging French entrepreneurs to invest in Poland even more. It will pay off!

This excellent relationship would not have been possible without the 2004 EU enlargement. The upcoming Polish-French Treaty on Enhanced Friendship and Cooperation should bring us even closer.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The call of freedom always resonates with French and Polish people.

Today, the call for freedom comes from Ukraine.

We are yet again challenged by an imperial Russia and its enablers all over the world.

Ukraine has suffered mightily after three years of war. But the threat posed by the Kremlin to Europe and to global world order itself may seem almost abstract.

The day before yesterday, the 4th of January, marked 65 years since the passing of one France's great writers – Albert Camus.

In *The Plague*, written almost 80 years ago, the townspeople of Oran long refuse to accept the ghastly risks they face. The danger seems unreal, even as the first victims die.

“There have been as many plagues as wars in history”, Camus writes. “Yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise”.

Maybe we were all naïve.

Maybe we all thought that the practical and moral benefits of peaceful cooperation in Europe were obvious even for Moscow,

That those greedy imperialist wars of the past could and would never recur.

Yet here we are. Europe once again having to deal both with war and a plague of nihilistic ideological extremism spreading outwards from the Kremlin.

And, in just a few days, we'll see a new US President whose own policy towards Europe is still an enigma.

So, two very big questions.

What's the right policy towards Ukraine and Russia now?

What does all this mean for Europe and European integration?

First, Ukraine and Russia.

Can our Europe be resilient, united, efficient and respected with Ukraine crushed and a victorious, emboldened Russia right at our borders?

If we believe in European integration – and Poland is a startling success story for European integration – should we stop spreading our prosperity and stability further east and south?

If we want a reliable partner in Russia, can we achieve this goal by sacrificing Ukraine?
By rewarding aggression?

If you say "No!" to all these questions, we share the same strategic outlook.

Ukraine deserves peace. Ukraine needs peace. But it should be peace on fair terms, not a capitulation.

We should not impose strict time limits on our support: that simply encourages Russia to keep fighting.

Instead we should do everything we can to improve Kyiv's position in any future talks.

We may soon face strong pressure to cut a deal with Moscow. But what sort of deal might a sane Europe accept?

Definitely not a facile deal that simply allows Moscow *reculer, pour mieux sauter* once it has regained some strength.

Europe is much stronger than Russian leaders think. And Russia is much weaker than many in Europe believe.

Russia has lost up to 200,000 soldiers. Hundreds of thousands more were wounded. Despite generous signing up fees Russian men are reluctant to join the army. With stocks of Soviet-era weaponry depleted Putin is also running out of equipment such as tanks and other armored vehicles.

Russia's economy faces surging inflation. Ordinary citizens see prices of basic goods increasing at an alarming rate.

State-controlled companies no longer stream billions of dollars to the national budget. Gazprom – a proud sponsor of Putin's regime – reports colossal losses, now set to become even worse as Russian gas supplies to Europe have ended.

Russian defense and security spending will rise by one-fourth next year, thus reaching 8 percent of GDP. Four of every ten budget rubles will be spent on the war machine and the security apparatus. Military expenditures outpace education, health care and social security.

Under such circumstances even despots can't sleep peacefully. Putin might well be asking himself why Monsieur Al-Assad is now living in Moscow.

Although undeniably vast, Moscow's resources are not infinite. Russia imports weapons from North Korean and Iran. It relies on China's help in circumventing Western sanctions.

Russia's war against Ukraine is not a regional or European family conflict. It's a war with global ramifications.

Europeans can see what the Kremlin has in store for all of us.

Russia has intensified hybrid and disinformation operations against many countries, including Poland and France. Arsons, assassinations, cyber-attacks. Russia is spying on our underwater energy and communication infrastructure in the Baltic Sea.

Its troll armies are poisoning our democratic discourse.

Putin's meddling in elections in Moldova, Georgia, and Romania are all about spreading chaos and uncertainty wherever possible.

This is simple. Russia under its current regime is and will remain the gravest and most immediate security threat to Europe and to global world order.

For all these reasons, now is not the time to give Vladimir Putin what he wants. It's high time to deter him.

The world wants a normal Russia.

But Russia, like the UK and France and all the other former colonial powers, needs to end its imperial chapter.

Poland never participated in the colonial race. After World War II our borders were redrawn by the great powers.

Poland gained territories in the west at the expense of Germany. But large areas of present-day Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine – parts of the Polish state before the war – were annexed by the Soviet Union.

Some believed these lands need to be reclaimed. I met such people as a refugee in London in the 1980's. Others argued for accepting the new reality.

One of them settled near Paris, in Maison-Laffitte. Jerzy Giedroyc and his L'Institut Littéraire de "Kultura" made a huge impression on Polish and European thinking.

Giedroyc – himself born in Minsk in today's Belarus – convincingly insisted that the freedom and independence of countries east of our borders were in Poland's national interest. That borders, however unfairly drawn, should be recognized.

That Russia, freed colonial delusions, can become a predictable and prosperous country, and European partner. We made our peace with Germany. I look forward to the day when we can normalize our relations in a similar way with all our neighbors, including Russia. But for that to happen, Ukraine needs to win.

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Second, what does all this mean for Europe?

As Poland takes over the presidency in the EU Council, Europe seems to be losing its momentum, its innovation, its competitive edge.

In 1992, the EU share of global GDP stood at 29 percent; today, it's down to 17 percent.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated economic problems. The war in Ukraine has exposed shortcomings in European defense. Migration pressure leaves us scrambling for long-term solutions.

Across Europe we all face the same problems, the same threats. They just have different local intensities.

France remains a European economic, security and defense superpower. I think that Warsaw and Paris agree on the need to boost innovation, to advance on artificial intelligence and – last but not least – to improve our common security.

However, Warsaw will insist on a strong European partnership with the United States. It is almost impossible to imagine Europeans pursuing an independent path in matters of defense outside the transatlantic framework and with no strong and effective NATO.

Poland agrees. Let's increase Europe's 'strategic responsibility' and defense capabilities. Not in opposition to the US, but in strategic harmony with Washington. This will require understanding and compromises on both sides of the Atlantic.

20 years ago, in 2003, France was right about the Iraq war. It was a bad idea premised on false pretenses. You should, however, understand other countries' rationale for engagement. A non-nuclear state such as Poland needs to rely on the US. If you try to build European military power in competition against Washington, you might once again cause a split within Europe as at the time of the Iraq war, into New and Old Europe. Such divisions serve no one but our adversaries.

Europe's deal with the US up to now might be crudely characterized as follows: *"You help defend us, we buy your weapons"*.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has made this model insufficient. If the US wants Europe to take greater responsibility for itself, it must accept that Europe needs a serious European military industry.

I share your perspective. We spend huge sums from our national budgets on American equipment. Poland alone is buying tens of billions of dollars' worth of tanks, aircraft and missiles. Washington should not question if we invest some of our common European funds primarily in European kit.

Europe also needs a new, active neighborhood policy, beyond day-to-day management of the ongoing crises. A policy based on values and mutual respect. That's why we're currently working with our EU partners to revise the concept of the Eastern Partnership.

Europe faces threats from Africa and the Middle East, to some extent provoked by Russia's malign influence.

We should press to deny Russia the right to its military bases in Syria. These help subversive Kremlin activities in North and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Moscow's actions in Africa echo its actions in Europe: undermining democracy, supporting illiberal regimes, dividing and discrediting the West. Thousands of Russian mercenaries in the so-called Wagner Group – now charmingly re-named "Africa Corps" – are rewarded with access to precious metal and mineral mines.

European countries risk losing their standing with African partners, limiting our ability to address irregular migration or organized crime.

This threatens the security not only of Mediterranean countries, but of Europe in general. Poland will support France rhetorically, materially and – if need be, militarily – in improving European security in this area.

One depressing fact must be faced.

Western condemnation of Putin's aggression is not shared in other parts of the world, primarily in the so-called Global South.

Putin has managed to present Ukraine as a pawn of so-called 'NATO imperialism', turning attention away from Russia's own explicit neo-colonial ambitions.

An urgent task faces us all in raising our public diplomacy game, to spell out what is really happening in Europe now.

Last but not least, social media.

I commend the French authorities for their decision to detain Telegram's CEO, Pavel Durov, over his suspected complicity in allowing crimes to be committed with the help of his communication platform. The question is – do we want to regulate social media by arresting their CEOs? Or should we – together with the business community – work out regulations preventing these technologies from rotting our children's brains, turning our people against each other, and destroying our political systems? Whether we succeed will be the true test of our European sovereignty.

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Mesdames et Messieurs,

Only a few nations maintain prominence over centuries. France is one of them.

What France and other such nations have in common is that they can adapt to new circumstances, but in a way that maintains their deeper identity.

Poland is also one of Europe's enduring nations. This year we will be celebrating the crowning of the first King of Poland a thousand years ago.

The last 35 years have been the best in our history. Speeding from bread queues and decay towards a World Top 20 GDP nation, in just some 1700 weeks! The European Commission estimates in 2025 Polish economy will again grow by 3,5%, one of the fastest in the European Union.

My point is that with the right policy mix, great things in Europe can happen fast.

With the wrong policy mix or just introspective dithering, crises can occur and spread no less quickly, upending lives even in places which now seem safe and secure. Just like the plague in Camus' masterpiece.

Earlier today, as I watched with awe the fabulous restoration of Notre-Dame Cathedral, I was filled with pride in our European heritage.

The new Notre-Dame is different from the one ravaged by fire. Its interior simpler and lighter, its acoustics changed.

And yet, as I looked at the famous towers and rosettes, there was no doubt in my mind this was the same glorious Notre-Dame de Paris which has watched over this city for almost seven centuries.

Maybe this can be a metaphor for the future of our continent. Restored, renewed, reformed, but with our distinct values and identity preserved.

France and Poland, acting together, can make this happen.

Thank you!