

POLAND. ALWAYS ON THE SIDE OF FREEDOM

At the end of last February, the media ran pictures of Polish borders, railway stations, cities, towns, and roads that showed waves of war-stricken Ukrainians – women, children, and old people – flowing into our country. The Poles opened their homes to them; volunteers, community workers, representatives of NGOs, officials at local and central levels and Polish services worked day and night; businessmen and regular citizens supported the refugees, organising aid, accommodation, food, care, and work. The world looked on in disbelief.

This should come as no surprise, given that the world did not know about Polish history. It did not know that the Poles value most of all freedom and a sense of community and that, in the face of unprecedented criminal aggression against the country with which we share some past grievances, solidarity in defence of those values comes first. This attitude has been the hallmark of the Polish culture for generations. Very early on in its development, the Polish identity was formed in step with an understanding of commonality and freedom. The latter was the foundation of social institutions that emerged to protect civic freedoms and respect human dignity.

From the days of Paweł Włodkowic and the 15th-century Council of Constance, the Poles have been well aware that freedom grows through interdependence. Deterministic ideas and restrictions were looked at askance. Freedom of conscience was sacred. The Commonwealth was inspired by Roman republicanism from which it adopted the notion of freedom from domination as a prerequisite for political life, the importance of tradition, the freedom to choose and decide, the feeling of what is right, and a sense of duty towards the community of free people. The republican and freedom-loving spirit was part and parcel of the Polish genotype. The Constitution of 3 May 1791 went down in history a great act of liberty. Its opponents claimed obsolete freedoms and chose despotism that eventually destroyed the carved-out space of freedom.

For 123 years, between late 18th-century and 1918, Poland was deprived of its statehood and sovereignty, relying primarily on the community of ideas, traditions, culture, and language. Attempts to restore independence were present in the tradition of Polish Positivism and insurrections. Our national mentality was shaped by the propensity to offer armed resistance to violence. In the 20th century, this manifested in the WW1 push for independence, redeeming lost territories (1918-21), hampering the progress of Bolshevism (1920), and combatting the Third Reich (1939). The “dream of freedom” continued in the Polish collective conscience. Then came the baptism of fire in the form of socialist realism that shattered social structures based on national values and the primacy of the family, triggered mass migrations, and negated human subjectivity. But not even that could suppress the drive for freedom (1980, 1989). In the light of all this, it becomes obvious why the Poles have so much understanding for the continued need to defend freedom and the right to self-determination.

The cultural and civilisational clash that the world could see so clearly during the Russian onslaught on Ukraine is also rooted in history. When the peripheral 15th-century Moscow

decided to extend its dominion onto the former Ruthenia, its dispute with the Commonwealth over the territories of today's Belarus and Ukraine went beyond political affiliation to include religious, civilisational, and ethnic identity. The Polish experiment of a political union with Lithuania showcased a political culture steeped in the ideas of participation and civic freedoms. Moscow, on the other hand, was already then running a radically different political system based on geographic expansion and the enforcement of political, military, and economic domination. Right from the outset, this supremacy was considered to be a threat to the existence of the Commonwealth, and very rightly so. The Polish political thought countered those imperial aspirations with the ideas of national self-determination which became the mainstay of the Polish anti-imperial eastern policy.

After regaining independence in 1918, Poland pursued its foreign policy based on the doctrine of the Intermarium, whose roots went back to the multicultural Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, a doctrine that called for an alliance of CEE countries to avoid the domination of Russia or Germany. It was premised on the solidarity and cooperation of all participating states, defence of sovereignty, development of subjectivity, and the pursuit of shared interests of CEE countries inspired by Poland. Following 1945, the concept was picked up by Polish emigrants (Polish Independence League) and members of the opposition in the Polish People's Republic.

When it got back its autonomy, Poland seemed too weak in terms of its resources, mentality, economy, and political clout to be the leader of change in the region, but it still had that sense of experience and duty stemming from history, geopolitics, neighbourhood relations, and an awareness of *raison d'état*. Meanwhile, disappointed by the results of its rapprochement with the West, Russia kept forging a separate identity and resurrecting imperial ambitions. Under the new circumstances, Poland felt that it virtually had an obligation to get involved in the East. A person that featured prominently in the pantheon the Polish eastern policy at that time was Lech Kaczyński, a practitioner of the anti-imperial doctrine developed through a long tradition of thinking about Poland's place in the world. The doctrine says that imperialism is a threat to peace, and the strategic interests of Poland include freedom, sovereignty and independence for our eastern neighbours.

But let us go back to history and values. The Poles have protected the European civilisation from the eastern menace on many occasions, acting as the bulwark of Christianity. Such was the case in the 13th (Legnica 1241), 17th (Vienna 1683), and 20th (Warsaw 1920) centuries. During the great war with the Teutonic Order (1409-11), they fought for a civilisation of solidarity, freedom and human dignity. At the Battle of Grunwald, the Poles, Lithuanians and Ruthenians defended their right to self-determination. At the end of the early modern period, it was believed that "Poland is wherever freedom is defended." On 25 January 1831, the demonstration in Warsaw featured the following motto: "In the name of God for our freedom and yours." It became the national motto of the Poles, a nation that, like none other, can relate to those who are ready to pay the highest price for their freedom.

During WW2, from the September Campaign to Berlin, "where there was the enemy, there were also the Poles," fighting in the resistance units, on the seas and oceans and in the air. They

then challenged the Soviet-imposed communist regime. It was Solidarity – that quintessentially Polish phenomenon, a freedom movement merging insurrection, civic and worker rights, postmodernism, religion, morality, revolution and social issues – that initiated the victorious process of dismantling the Soviet domination in Central and Eastern Europe.

Yes, the Poles treat solidarity and the love of freedom not as an empty catchphrase, but a geopolitical concept that is one of the pillars of their foreign policy. It is not only a source of pride, but also a duty. To prevent the defeat of Ukraine, we need to pool our efforts and act in solidarity. Poland shall not give up this struggle and will always stand in solidarity to defend freedom.

Piotr Gliński

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