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It is a great privilege to be able to say a few words in such an important moment for your community and in front of such a wonderful audience. I said, "your community", although of course, for a couple of hours now, I have the right and the honour to call it, "our community", as a freshly nominated doctor honoris causa of your – oh, excuse me – of our university. During that ceremony, I referred to the maxim of the first honorary doctor of the Technical University of Dortmund, president Johannes Rau: "To reconcile, not divide" and I said: "The European Union – the way I understand it – is founded on positive thinking and positive values. There would not be our Europe – and there will not be our Europe – without reconciliation, without solidarity and without mutual respect." And I added that "you don't need to graduate in engineering or architecture from the Technical University of Dortmund to understand that in politics, bridges are more important than walls, though we know how much easier and faster it is to raise a wall, than to build a bridge. I am convinced that this is the reason why you have taken the trouble of studying: to avoid the temptation of simplifying and cutting corners. That in the spiritual, but also the political dimension, you will always be builders of bridges, and not walls."

These words were inspired by the whole of my life's experience, in which – whether I wanted it, or not – politics was still present, together with its most dramatic symptoms and expressions. And everything began exactly on 16 December, 48 years ago, in my hometown of Gdańsk.

It was 1970, I was 13, when tragic events played out in front of my eyes. The police and the army opened fire on protesting workers. Many of them died, hundreds were wounded, many vehicles and buildings were burned, including tanks and the communist party headquarters. The streets of Gdańsk became a school of life, and a first lesson in politics, which I will never forget. I was very young, but I understood instinctively what was going on, and who was right; where good was, and where evil was; who was telling the truth, and who was telling lies. It was an unusually exciting lesson, filled with emotions, rage and hope, all at the same time.

It was then that I found out for the first time that those who are right don't always win. That lies and evil can triumph over truth and good. I fully identified with those beaten and humiliated. At the same time, I lived through these events as if they were some kind of holiday, the first big, adulthood adventure, which briefly interrupted the terrifying monotony of the *status quo*.

Many years later, when – as a student – I organised the structures of illegal opposition to the communist rule, I noticed that the memory of those past events took on the characteristics of a myth, which heavily influenced the imaginations of the participants in our meetings. As a young historian, I was dealing at the time with the role of myths and legends in the Polish politics of the 1930s, and already back then I had no doubt that emotions, symbols and simplifications motivate people much more than rational arguments and programmes. That they can be very useful, but also very dangerous, especially if mythologies begin to dominate in the public sphere. Ernst Cassirer wrote about this. According to him, the politicians of the Weimar Republic made a crucial mistake in being occupied only with improving the economic situation of the masses, tackling unemployment and inflation. At the same time, being sober thinking, rational individuals, they remained completely blind to the explosive force of political myths. This great mistake caused a catastrophe. When the political and intellectual elites of the German democracy began to notice what was at stake, when they began to understand the nature of the new political myths, it was already too late. They lost the battle before they realised that it had just started.

Let us return to my story. The legend of the December protest turned out to be a very effective founding myth of Solidarność. Before the movement was established, in the second half of the 1970s, we organised illegal demonstrations every 16 December, outside the Gdańsk shipyard. That is when I met Lech Wałęsa – no one knew back then that he himself would soon become a legend. Solidarność mobilised millions of people against the regime, who – despite realities such as the presence of the Soviet army – decided to act. They were guided by the eternal motto of Gdańsk: *nec temere, nec timide*, neither rashly, nor timidly. It was that synthesis of emotions and reason, synthesis of myth and plan, synthesis of symbols and pragmatism, that brought victory.

Of course, not straight away. In the meantime, there was martial law in Poland and, again, the 16 December, 37 years ago, the communists again shot at workers and demonstrators. 9 coalminers on strike were killed by the police in Katowice. In Gdańsk, despite tanks in the streets and tear gas, despite the knowledge that authorities were shooting at people again, one hundred thousand demonstrators surrounded the shipyard and the monument for the victims of December 1970, in order to remember them, pray for them and lay flowers. Such was the force of the legend of December.

People will not fight with full determination for procedures or abstract ideas. They will be ready to get involved in public affairs and sacrifice a lot only if emotions are sparked in them. They can be good or bad emotions. They can erupt in poor as well as rich countries. Money is important to people, but it is not everything.

Today in Europe, we are witnessing a wave of populist rhetoric with a xenophobic and authoritarian twist, both in old as well as new democracies. This trend is visible, regardless of the degree of wealth in societies, their culture and history. The crisis – in so many areas of western civilisation, including outside our continent – of classic liberal democracy, attacked and increasingly effectively weakened by various, leftist and – what is more common today – right-wing demagogues, stems not only from non-economic, but also non-rational sources. It reflects the force of myths and symbols which these demagogues uphold, using them to tempt masses of followers and disorientated citizens.

It comes the easier to them, the harder it is to distinguish between lies and the truth, between fake-news and news. It is here that the present-day Zeitgeist is expressed. The facts are losing against imagined concepts, experts and academics are losing against extremely astute demagogues, particularly in cyber-space. Unfortunately, today it is they who have the power over emotions, even if the facts and arguments are against them.

Liberal democracy and the European Union – grand projects in the moral and practical dimension – are not able today to rouse such emotions or release feelings, as national myths do, myths brought up again at every opportunity. Cool persuasion, common sense, and even economic interests stand no chance in confrontation with passion.

Those are right, who stress that the need for myths is timeless. We cannot replace it with cold calculation. But, as not only my experience shows, myths and symbols don’t have to serve a bad cause only. European democrats cannot surrender to fatalism, they cannot let emotions be weapons only in the hands of political charlatans. They have to stand up to them, also in the mythical symbolical sphere. If the only thing on our side is knowledge, and on their side – faith, we will lose. This is the first lesson I take from my Decembers.

The second is that the new generations will not accept the status quo forever, even if it is clearly better than the past, and even if they don’t have ideas for a better future. One of the main reasons why I became a rebel in my youth was – as I mentioned already – an unbearable sense of boredom.

From time to time, people crave change more than comfort. For too long we have lived in times of *grand ennui*, *die grosse Langweile* as someone said, commenting on the protests of the French *gilets jaunes*, the yellow vests. We will not stop this desire by repeating our slogans about stabilisation. Taking risks, even without rational reasons, is the eternal right of the young. Whether it will be destructive or creative, depends to a large degree on the quality of the political leadership.

And this is the third lesson from my Decembers. Jacek Kuroń, one of the legendary leaders of the Polish democratic opposition, once said: "Don't burn down party committees, set up your own". The committee was the common name for the headquarters of the communist party. In 1970, such committees burned in Gdańsk, among other places, which gave the authorities a pretext for brutal repressions. As he led Solidarność, Lech Wałęsa always remembered this commandment. Politicians who take action unaware of what results it will bring, are always a big threat. On the centenary of the end of the First World War, it is worth reminding ourselves of the story of its beginning, with all those sleepwalkers in power, who – having the best intentions and a hopelessly weak imagination – led Europe to catastrophe. Max Weber wrote about the ethics of responsibility. Today, I would like to dedicate his words to some of the contemporary leaders on both sides of the Atlantic, and in particular to the authors of Brexit.

Today we need leaders who understand that their role is not only having technocratic skill and the ability to stay in power. We need leaders who can use the potential of emotions to defend our fundamental values. Leaders, who not only understand the scale of the threats, but who can also prevent them. Herfried Münkler once wrote a fantastic essay, "Odysseus and Cassandra". Cassandra, who knew very well what would happen, who warned everyone against the impending catastrophe, but no one listened to her. Today, we have many politicians and intellectuals who feel comfortable in the role of fore-warners, as prophetic as Cassandra, and equally helpless. And there are so few Odysseuses, smart (that's how Homer described Odysseus), efficient, and when it is necessary – ruthless, and capable of sacrifices. Odysseus, practical to the extreme, understands the meaning of symbols and irrational elements in politics. A few weeks before the construction of the great horse – writes Münkler – Odysseus gets into Troy through the cloaca. Disguised as a beggar, stinking of excrement, together with Diomedes, he steals the statue of Pallas Athena, in order to deprive Troy of the last remains of divine protection. As the seer Helenus foretold Odysseus earlier, the city can be conquered only when the statue disappears. Let us listen, therefore, to Cassandras, but choose Odysseuses as leaders.

The fourth lesson from my Decembers – the most important to me personally – is the experience of violence, lies and lawlessness. An experience known by all those who have lived in places where undemocratic powers are beyond any control. Where you can beat and kill a man without any reason, where lies become omnipresent, where rights apply only to those in power, while citizens have only obligations.

That is why, when today I hear European politicians, who wipe out all the tradition of liberal democracy, for whom human rights, minority rights,

government within the law, the precedence of the constitution over the will of rulers, and free media are empty slogans, I loudly say: no. Because I know what these principles mean, remembering still what life is like for a man deprived of rights, who is at the mercy – or lack of mercy – of those in power.

Europe is the best place on Earth, and the European Union is the best political invention in our history – as long as we stand by these principles. That's what my heart and mind tell me, my knowledge and my faith. And being with you here today, I know that I am not alone. Thank you.

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