

Speech by President Donald Tusk at the Athens Democracy Forum 2019

There are three reasons why I am grateful for the invitation to Athens. I will begin with the most banal one, which is very obvious and personal at the same time. The history of Greece has always been my passion. Before I was ten I read Homer's *Iliad* in Polish. No sooner had I finished, than I started reading it again, and so it went for several months. Almost learnt it by heart. 'Sing, o goddess, the anger of Achilles, son of Peleus, that brought countless ills upon the Achaeans'. Homer had given my life a meaning, because children also look for a meaning and a purpose in life. I decided to become an archaeologist, to discover the ruins of Troy, and read everything there was to read in Polish about ancient Greece: mythology, Plutarch, essays on Athenian architecture and the *Peloponnesian War*, philosophers and Herodotus. Imagine my despair when I read the biography of the famous archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann. It turned out that Troy had been discovered long ago, and so I lost my sense of purpose for quite some time.

So the only thing I could do was to pursue a more modest dream: to become a historian and, sometime in the future, to see the Acropolis with my own eyes. The first dream came true after ten years, the second – after forty years. When, as a fully grown man, I first arrived in Athens, having climbed the Acropolis and put my arms around one of the columns of the *Erechtheion*, I was moved to tears just like when I first read about the deadly arrow of Paris hitting the heel of Achilles.

Immersed in Greek history, and a bit later also in Greek tragedy and philosophy, I had to, sooner or later, come across that cursed word: politics. Cursed today, since for the ancient Greeks, *politikon* had many positive meanings: public, civic, daily, ordinary, sociable, even polite! The spelling of the word *polite* is not a coincidence.

In secondary school, our history teacher told us to read Sophocles' *Antigone*, and then act out the trial of Creon. No-one wanted to be his advocate. Then the teacher looked at me with a telling smile and said, 'Donald, you always have something to say, even when not asked, and ancient Greece is your passion, so you will defend Creon'. Oh my god, I – a 17-year-old idealist – am forced to take the side of a merciless tyrant, the side of authority, against rebellion? I didn't know Max Weber at the time, I had no idea about the ethics of responsibility, but I managed somehow, and when the class gave their verdict, it was a draw. Perhaps it was then that, unknowingly, I became a politician. One thing is for sure, a quarter of a century later I became the head of government in Poland.

There is also a second reason for my gratitude for the invitation to Athens. It gave me the opportunity to have an extended discussion, just hours ago, with my friends, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and his predecessor Alexis Tsipras. Of course these were separate meetings, as you may guess, but in essence they were quite similar. Even if the battle dust has only just

settled after the last election campaign, both my interlocutors focused not on that which today divides the people of Greece and Europe (and there would be much to talk about), but on that which can and should unite us, how to bring back a positive meaning to the term *Politeia*, which Cicero translated into Latin as *Res Publica*, a public affair. This may perhaps be the greatest challenge of our times – how to make out of politics what it once was: acting and thinking for the common good. Because, after all, we all feel how social entities and political communities are breaking into incompatible pieces. Increasingly often we are witnesses and victims of growing polarisation. Earlier partners, still yesterday competitors, today – sworn enemies. I can see this process happening in so many places, including my home country. Politics, from being the art of coexistence of different ideas and communities, is turning into the ability to deal brutally with opponents, competitors, misfits or strangers. Violence, lies, hate speech, myths and resentment – these are the tools of today's politics. It is politics understood as war: even if shots are not fired everywhere, almost everywhere, some part, some fragment of the whole, wants to destroy, invalidate or totally subordinate the others. Emotions have replaced reason, while in political mathematics, dividing and subtracting have displaced multiplying and adding.

It is no accident that in the latest issue of the prestigious Polish periodical *Political Review* (*Przegląd Polityczny*) devoted to Brexit, there are essays on Thucydides and his reflection on the theme of *stasis*, an ancient Greek term literally meaning: a part, a faction, denoted a state of public disorder, chaos resulting from political passions and a constant escalation of internal conflicts. As an example Thucydides gave the situation in Korkyra, where agreement was not possible also because, in the heat of the battle, the sides freely changed the meanings of words, while values were being reversed. Madness and reckless audacity came to be seen as courage; common sense as cowardice, moderation as conformism. Every pause for thought or attempt at reflection was treated as capitulation or laziness. Those who sowed anger, resentment and destruction became figures of political and even moral authority, and whoever resisted them, in the name of order and prudence, was under suspicion.

Thucydides noticed that in the state of upheaval, human nature comes before justice. Emotions and passions, inherent in our nature, are stronger than our attachment to the laws and rules we ourselves have established, and will always be pushing us towards violation and domination. The most important political inventions of humanity – democracy, human rights and freedoms, international order, checks and balances, the rule of law – they all stem from this awareness of our nature as well as from past, negative experiences. But do they stem only from the past? Aren't we today facing our own *stasis*, amplified by the technological revolution and the mass character of social phenomena? Are Europe and the world not turning, before our eyes, into ancient Korkyra?

I am curious how today Thucydides would diagnose the situation in the United States under the administration of President Trump, in the United Kingdom in the time of Brexit and permanent parliamentary crisis, in some countries in

East Central Europe, where the foundations of liberal democracy and the rule of law are being undermined, or on the border of Russia and Ukraine. For sure he would have something to write about.

There is also a third reason why I'm grateful for the invitation to your Forum. To me personally, it is especially important and moving. This is because the hosts have decided to award the prize posthumously to Paweł Adamowicz, my friend and close collaborator, the Mayor of my city, Gdańsk, who was murdered in January this year. He was stabbed to death the moment after saying the following words, addressed to thousands of people gathered in Gdańsk, at the culmination of a great charity event, and I quote: "Gdańsk is generous, Gdańsk shares its good, Gdańsk wants to be a city of solidarity. This is a wonderful time of sharing what is good." He fell victim to hatred, which he opposed all his life. He was not an ancient hero, like Demetrius Poliorcetes, he did not conquer or destroy other cities. He built his city with the belief that not everything is lost, that love is stronger than hate, that solidarity is stronger than egoism. I also believe that not everything is lost, and I want to wish you all the same faith.