

25 Years After: the Evolution of Mental Geography in Europe
(Edited transcript)

Dzień dobry,

I gave the title to this talk before things went crazy in Ukraine. I hope this also helps Ukrainians and the rest of us think about Ukraine, a country for which I pray. When I was working in Radio Free Europe in 1980s I was a hard-core cold warrior, I never liked communism, or totalitarian regimes. A problem with talking about those things back in those days was that people didn't believe you.

So some twenty-five years ago I started to write an essay called "A Continent of Émigrés". This was not about the internal emigration of the intelligentsia under communism, but rather about empiricism, the Enlightenment idea of Western civilization that knowledge is first and foremost based on experience.

For those of you who know your compatriots abroad, all who lived in the UK or the US, you know that if you were a Pole or an Estonian or a Hungarian who lived there and knew what communism was about, and talked about it, more often than not you were branded a "right-wing reactionary émigré". This was a paradox of life in the West. If you knew what you were talking about, then you were "a reactionary".

Look at Czesław Miłosz: his amazing book "The Captive Mind" was considered a reactionary text. Because he knew what he was talking about. He knew very well. Or in the case of Estonians, when Estonians fled from Soviet occupation to Sweden, we all know the story that the Swedes would ask you: "Why did you come here?", and so you'd say: "They deported us", and the Swedes would ask: "Why didn't you call the police?" I don't know if it's true or not but it is a myth we all believe in.

So I wanted to write this essay, saying, OK, Eastern Europe has been liberated, now everyone

in the West can see that in fact, we are not reactionaries and émigrés, rather all these people, 100 million people can bear witness to what communism was about. And we wouldn't be called right-wing reactionary emigrants.

As it turned out, I was wrong. And I never finished the essay. First of all, I was very busy trying to get Estonia independent, a little after Poland was liberated. But it turned out that what we said was not being listened to, it was not being trusted. When the Czechs wanted to actually expose their communist past, they were attacked in the New York Review of Books and by the American Civil Liberties Union and so forth. So what happened was that we in fact did have "the continent of émigrés", which we see until this day. If you are from Eastern Europe and you know what you are talking about because you have experienced communism, because you have experienced the secret police or you have experienced what we see right now, Russian aggression, you are not to be taken as seriously as those people who know nothing about it. So I would say it was a failure on my part to want to write an essay called "The Continent of Émigrés". Or I could turn it around and say that it was a very good essay I have not yet written because we are still treated like right-wing reactionaries because we actually know what we are talking about.

The idea of mental geography is not mine at all, it came from an essay by Milan Kundera written in 1984, in which he says that where you live is determined by other people's subjective idea of where you are. Milan Kundera pointed out already in 1984 in NYRB that even though Prague was 300 kilometers to the West of Vienna, Prague, and Estonia and Poland likewise, were considered "East", while Vienna was seen as "West". The term East referred to grey people living in grey houses leading grey lives, and implied that they actually liked this kind of life, as opposed to in fact wanting to live in a liberal democracy.

The problem is that this understanding of "East" as metageography persists. It was a borderline that exists to this day, that we saw only as recently as just two days ago, in the foreign affairs committee, or the council of European foreign ministers – where you could see that Western countries, "Old Europeans" said: "Those East Europeans, they are so anti-Russian, what are they talking about, we have investments, we can't give up these investments because our economies will suffer. Don't ask what the Russians are doing to the Ukrainians, let's forget about it!"

So we still have, 25 years later, people talking about "Post-Soviet", "post-Socialist" – or another term which we see all the time, "New" – members. Let us keep in mind, Poland joined NATO 15 years ago. Estonia joined NATO ten years ago. Estonia and Poland joined the European Union ten years ago. Ten years ago I was in the European Parliament. At that time, the Neutral

countries, Sweden, Finland and Austria, had only been in the European Union for nine years. But they were never called the new members of the European Union. They were just members of the European Union. Open a newspaper today that talks about the EU, about the positions of, say, Poland, Estonia, the Czechs – it's the "new" members. We joined the EU ten years ago, but we continue to be "new".

We need to work hard at developing a revised view of our mental geography. When it comes to countries like Ukraine, we can see a very big difference in understanding between countries like yours and mine and other countries in the West. They would rather not deal with this problem of having these troublesome Ukrainians spoiling deals, complicating gas deals, complicating all kinds of business that can be conducted. This is something that we here in our countries have a special obligation to stand up against.

Because what we are seeing happening to Ukraine, what is being done to Ukraine, is something so unconscionable, so awful and so terrible, we cannot allow a repetition of what we saw in 1938, when Chamberlain said: "We can't be bothered about what happens to a faraway country we know nothing about". It is the obligation of all of us with a moral conscience to stand up for Ukraine and make the Ukrainian case, and not allow other people to say: "That's far off in the East, we don't have to deal with it." So this mental geography issue is far more important than being just an interesting theoretical construct, because on it hangs the fate of 40 million people.

This whole idea of "New Europe", of "Eastern Europe", finally is losing its importance and its meaning, because it is less and less valid today, and I will later on offer a new meaning for "New Europe". If you actually look at the last five years, the division in Europe has not been East versus West. It has not been "New" versus "Old". It's been shifting, 90 degrees. If you look at the last five years of the economic crisis, there's been no correlation between "Old" and "West", or "New" and "East".

It's shifted 90 degrees. And this shift can be not only seen when it comes to the size of the deficits, it's not simply how much money countries owe, it also shows up in Transparency International's Index of Corruption and all kinds of other measures. The new division is North and South. And there it doesn't matter any more whether you are "new" or "old". You can be new or old, but if you're Poland, you're not "Eastern Europe" any more. Poland is Northern Europe. Poland and Estonia are the countries that were responsible, that came out of the crisis doing well, that did what needed to be done, that did not have to go to the European Union to be bailed out. I won't name the ones who did, but they are not in the East, they're not old or new.

Some of the countries in trouble are new, some are old, but it is not a matter of when they joined the European Union. It shouldn't be a matter what their latitude is, but the divisions in Europe that exist today are in altogether different dimensions than in the past. And this difference – I am not fond of differences, I don't think we should have differences – but if we're going to look at where the differences are then let's name them as they are and not insist on old categories of the type that we have all suffered under.

I remember having dinner with a very high ranking former member of the European establishment who happened to be from Spain. And he turned toward me and said: "You are not going to start being as prejudiced about us as we were about you, are you?"

So it is even recognized that this kind of attitude exists. And that attitude has existed for a long time. If you really want to trace its roots, there is a wonderful book by Larry Wolff, called the "Inventing Eastern Europe: Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment", which was actually about the writings of Diderot and Voltaire, who, living under the autocracy of the French monarchy couldn't criticize the Catholic church, and they couldn't criticize the king, so if they wanted to write about despotism and superstition, what they did was that they talked about it in travelogues, various French and German writers went to places like Moldova and Poland, and used that to describe their own societies. Larry Wolff argued that that was the beginning of this attitude towards Eastern Europe that we are still trying to shake off.

As I pointed out, the German term *Polnische Wirtschaft* is not a new term, it's two hundred years old. This prejudice has been around for a long time. When I was living in Munich, working in Radio Free Europe, I lived in an apartment building and one day I came downstairs and my bicycle had been stolen. I went to the
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ausmeisterinnen

and told her that my bicycle was stolen. And she said: "

Heute gestohlen, morgen in Polen!

" That is the kind of attitude that we've had to deal with. And it is precisely the kind of attitude that we saw being used and abused in a most fundamentally racist way in 2004-2005 with the referendum on the European Constitution in France – most of you are old enough to remember the whole ridiculousness The Polish Plumber debate in France.

All of those things represent a view in the West of East Europeans that I find completely unconscionable and that I think we need to fight against. On top of the idea of grey people living in grey houses and doing labor cheaply living in the East, we also have an additional dimension

which has also caused us some problems, maybe now less so. But 12 years ago one of the smartest thinkers on security policy in the US Robert Kagan wrote an essay, and later a book, "Of Paradise and Power", in which he maintained that Europeans are from Venus and Americans are from Mars.

The idea was that Europeans are not willing to fight, they are not willing to use force, whereas Americans are. This idea was then picked up by Donald Rumsfeld who was the Secretary of Defense in the US in the Bush administration, and he made use of a dividing line again between "Old" and "New" Europe, and he pointed to a high correlation between those countries and the Europeans who were from Mars and the Europeans who were from Venus – as it turned out, the "New Europe", the new members were also the countries that were willing to spend on defense, they were the ones who were willing to go into Iraq, they were the ones who went, without caveats, into Afghanistan, they were the ones who were referred to by the French president as "badly brought up children who don't know when to shut up" – you may be too young to remember this, it was only ten years ago. For me, ten years is "only".

So what do we have here? Not only were the "new members" the ones who were not so rich and were taking away the jobs, but on top of that they were more militant. With this kind of picture of us, I would say that instead of bemoaning this, we should say that this trend represents a future direction for Europe. We are the new Europe. We are the new Europe, because what we do, when it comes to economics, is the right thing. We pay our debts, we don't borrow more than we can pay back; we don't let our budgets go onto deficit. When we need to show solidarity for countries that are in need, we go and do that. When we need to pay our 2%, at least countries like Poland and Estonia – we have all agreed to do this –, we do that!

So what we need to do is to look at our positions on all kinds of issues, and instead of allowing ourselves to be written off as "oh, those new members", we say that we are the new members, this is New Europe. The New Europe that is responsible, for its economy as well as for its position in the world, we are willing to go and defend European values, we are willing, in the Council that will take place tomorrow [March 20], to say that we have to apply sanctions to aggressive states – that may cost us a little money, yes, it will cost everyone a little money to apply sanctions to a country that has just invaded another country and has annexed its territory.

Because we know that we still have enough of the historical memory to know that if we don't stand up for others, no one else will. What I would like to see is that we change our understanding of what Eastern Europe is about, what New Europe is about, and instead show greater pride. Where did the innovations come from today? Which are the innovative countries? Which were the countries that came out of the economic downturn of the great recession? The

most successful one is clearly Poland, right? We didn't do too badly either, we did not get into the kind of trouble that we'd need bailouts. So my argument is that we have to take a stronger position in Europe than we have until now, we have to reject the position that we see in too many countries in Europe. Two examples I can bring, one is that Jean-Claude Piris in Financial Times three years ago – he was the former head of legal services in the European Union, and he was considered a great legal scholar of the European Union, – said that the entire economic crisis was due to the Eastward enlargement of the European Union. He did not have any evidence but this was the standard position and I heard him give the speech in France and the audience applauded. East Europeans were not responsible for the indebtedness of Greece and for the expenditures in Spain, and for the fiscal irresponsibility that we've seen in so many countries.

And, there is a person even today in the External Action Service of the EU who maintains, in the Commission, that "we wouldn't have any problems with Russia if it were not for those new members". And I think that kind of attitude will be fought only when we take greater responsibility. How do we take greater responsibility? For one, it is completely unconscionable that ten years after the enlargement of the European Union and fifteen years after the enlargement of NATO, in your case, no people from the East are in any executive positions in either NATO or the European Union.

How is that possible? This time around, which will be the third time we have a voice in these matters, we have to absolutely insist that the so-called new members are no longer new, and that they are equally qualified, or in certain cases maybe more qualified to occupy positions of leadership, executive positions in the European Union and NATO. I personally would much rather see someone who has experienced the Soviet Union as the Secretary General of NATO than someone who has only read about it, even when he's old enough to have read about it back when it existed. When it comes to foreign affairs in the European Union, given where our problems are, then I think that certainly someone who has had experience under Communism and with Russia is far more qualified to be the High Commissioner for foreign and security policy than someone for whom it is an academic exercise.

I would actually go further than that. I've come up with something I call the 25% rule, which we can apply both to the European Union and to NATO. It's based on the proposition that you can't have a leadership position in the European Union or NATO if in your previous position you didn't really fulfill your obligations, and the 25% rule would be as follows: When it comes to NATO, if you are more than 25% below the 2% contribution rule, that is, if you contribute less than 1,5 % of the GDP to NATO, then your country doesn't really deserve the position of the Secretary General because how can the Secretary General of a country that does not pay its due come and tell other countries they should pay for defense? It's not going to be believable, there will be no real moral authority behind this.

And so, too, when it comes to the Maastricht criteria where all of us have committed to having a deficit of no more than 3%, and not having a national indebtedness of more than 60% of the GDP. Applying the 25% rule to that would mean that you do not have a deficit of more than 4%, and an indebtedness greater than 80% of the GDP. Because if you violate those rules and you are currently a prime minister or a foreign minister, then how do you come to a position in Europe and say: bad-bad-bad, you overspent! You have no moral authority. You don't have the credibility then. And clearly, when you look at Europe today, where the credibility and moral authority comes from are the countries that played by the rules, and in general, more often than not, the countries that play by the rules are the so-called new members.

So this will be my request, to think about having more pride in being a new member. Today, we, the new members, are doing the right things, we are the countries that in fact are doing what Europe should do, and that is a whole range of activities, not just following the rules but also, look at where the innovation is taking place in Europe, where we see people willing to actually support opening of the internal market. We see people complaining all the time that Europe is falling behind, but who are the people preventing the opening of the internal market to the digital economy – it's not the new members.

So if we want Europe to survive, if we want Europe to be successful, what we need to do is to see far more of New Europe playing a leadership role than it has done in the past. It is Poland, it is Estonia, our willingness to do the reforms – those are the countries that have in fact done better, and the ones that are pushing for reforms, so maybe what we need is a rebranding of our mental geography. A rebranding of who's what. It's no longer that Old Europe is necessarily good – old in general is not necessarily good. New is not necessarily bad – in our case, new is good. Especially when I talk to students, I say, look around and see: this is the future. You are the future. You are the people who are going to change this situation and who'll, with pride, say: I'm from New Europe. We don't accept the old dogmas. We think that freedom and liberty is something worth standing up for, that free trade is a good thing in the European Union, we think that protectionism is not a good idea, and when people are being oppressed in our neighborhood then it is our thing to defend them and stand up for them and not worry about what it's going to do to our profits.

So I am very hopeful for the future. And I think that the mental geography that we have been suffering under in the most negative terms for too many years, should be turned around and I look forward to you to change that. That is why I always feel so good when I come to Poland, because there aren't so many Estonians, we're just a little over a million, and so we can't make much of effect in Europe, but there are 40 million Poles, and I see people who think the way we do, and I feel encouraged that we have a brilliant future ahead of us.

Thank you very much.