

“World Affairs: Through Our Eyes”

Lecture of Arkady Rzegocki, Polish Ambassador to the Court of St James’s

Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution

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To the Right Worshipful Mayor of the Royal City of Bath,

Dear representatives of the Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution

Honourable and distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I wish to start by thanking the Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution for their kind invitation. I also wish to extend my words of appreciation to the Mayor’s Office for their outstanding hospitality and openness towards the Polish community in this historic City.

I was invited here to talk on the most critical aspects of world affairs from our perspective focusing on our internal affairs and on our role as an actor in world affairs.

I would like to focus most on the practical aspect of conducting diplomacy, as that is something I have the honour and privilege of being at the centre of for the last year and a half in the context of Polish – British relations.

1.

Allow me to begin by providing an outline of the history of Poland and the main policy goals of its government.

As in the case of any other country, Polish foreign policy is shaped by its history, geographical setting, demography, neighbours and their military, economic and political potential etc.

Poland is a country situated at the heart of continental Europe and is neighbour to two major powers – Germany and Russia. I would argue that to large extent this geographical factor has shaped much of Poland’s regional goals over the last three hundred years. Due to much closer cultural links with other Slavic nations, Central and Eastern Europe has become the natural territory of Poland’s activities. In the past centuries, this eventually led to the creation of the unique construct of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which existed from the 14th to the 18th century and in many respects was a political project much ahead of its time.

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth had a system of government which aimed at securing broad political participation of and required consensus in the decision-making process.

Unlike other early modern states in the continent which then was increasingly subject to the absolute rule of the monarch and torn by numerous religious wars, the ruler of this country

who was a King in Poland and a Grand Duke in Lithuania was elected by popular vote and whose power was limited by rules of law set by the parliament or *Polish Sejm*.

For the standards of that age, the parliament or *Sejm* represented a significant percentage of the population, although the domination of the nobles over the clergy and the cities was clear.

At the peak of its power, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was the biggest country in Europe. Being home to such an array of denominations and ethnic backgrounds, the religious wars which tore Western Europe apart were unknown in the Commonwealth. Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Muslims all enjoyed religious freedom. Because of that unique approach, Poland was a safe haven to people from all over Europe.

Unfortunately this unique political system developed in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was not without its weaknesses, and although by the late 18th century the *Polish Sejm* conceived the May 3rd Constitution in 1791 (the first such constitution in Europe), a document which respected individual liberties and provided the instruments to safeguard the division and limitation of powers, it did not prevent the Commonwealth from fractional and regional bickering, slowness of decision making process and corruption.

And as the surrounding powers, namely Russia, Austria and Prussia developed much more “effective” absolute monarchic systems, my country eventually was partitioned between the three and was for 123 years erased from the world’s political map. Poland re-emerged as a sovereign state after the World War I, in 1918.

I would argue that the disappearance of the Commonwealth from the world map in 1795 had a detrimental effect on the whole of European history of the 19th century.

If this country remained as a viable, tolerant and to large extent an active democratic actor on the political stage, it would in my opinion have a very toning effect on other major actors in Europe and maybe could have prevented the tragedy of the World War One from happening.

2.

In November 1918, with the end of the Great War and a fall of the three partitioners, Poland came back to existence and started the difficult process of reuniting the country and its people.

The rise of the totalitarian regimes of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, inflicted a real threat to the very existence of this young country. The Ribbentrop – Molotov Pact of 1939 sealed the partition of Poland and paved the way to the start of the Second World War.

The Second World War cost Poland millions of lives, amongst those who suffered most were Polish Jews, who were killed and repressed by the Nazi Germany and Soviet occupants.

Polish soldiers fought bravely with their British Allies on numerous battlefields and fronts across Europe, worth mentioning are the Polish Squadrons who fought in the Battle of Britain,

the Battles of Narvik, Tobruk, Monte Cassino. Others fought valiantly at the liberation of Flanders and the Netherlands led by the 1st Armoured Division under Gen. Maczek, or under the leadership of Gen. Sosabowski and his paratroopers during Operation Market-Garden.

This difficult time of war has especially forged Polish-British friendship which we enjoy today.

3.

Europe is a continent which has only enjoyed brief moments of longer lasting peace. The tragedies of the Two World Wars proved that the paradigm of realpolitik is a road to self-annihilation.

That is why we should all cherish the bravery of post-war statesmen who decided to escape this vicious circle and replace the rivalry with cooperation, which in effect brought peace and prosperity to Western Europe.

But not all countries could be part of this great project. Due to decisions taken by Allied powers in Yalta and Potsdam, half of Europe, from Szczecin to Trieste, was given away to the Soviet sphere of interests. It is exactly because of these geopolitical decisions which were made at the cost of many Poles, made many of my fellow countrymen eventually decide to stay here after the war.

In 1989 the Iron Curtain finally fell and Poland could again fully decide for herself. Thanks to the cross-party consensus on foreign policy, my country became a member of NATO in 1999 and of the European Union in 2004. We have managed to build and develop a modern economy which is closely connected to the rest of Europe and the world.

Although year 2004 to many marks the symbolic end of the transformation period, I would say that 13 years later, Poland is still undergoing major changes aimed in making the country a more just, inclusive and economically sustainable.

4.

Today, Poland is a fast-growing, dynamic economy and a reliable political partner in Europe. Despite what is being sometimes said, Poland is among the strongest proponents of just, fair and transparent European cooperation. We are committed to preserving EU's achievements and make it a strong and ready to face unprecedented institutional, economic and political challenges, both internal and external ones.

Poles overwhelmingly perceive membership in the EU as one of the greatest achievements in our recent history. Obviously to some extent this support reflected in the opinion polls can be explained by the wide stream of EU funding helping to modernize our infrastructure, economy and industries.

The EU is facing numerous challenges – just to mention a few, we have the uncontrolled wave of immigration from the South which undermines the common border and the Schengen

system, Russia's aggression in the Ukraine makes it urgent for the EU to come up with more coherent foreign and defense policies, and to deal with still existing economic differences between the northern and the southern EU Members so as to see how best to lead the Eurozone economic governance and of course – the Brexit.

Polish Government is often described as anti-European, euro-sceptic. Nothing is further from the truth. We want the EU to be a strong and effective bond of European states, which is capable of tackling major crises and contribute to the prosperity of the continent.

But in order to be such an organisation, the EU and its Member States cannot rely on past experience as a recipe for success. The EU requires honest discussion and tackling the root causes of the given challenge. Hiding behind political correctness and dismissing justified concerns which are being raised can only lead the whole of the EU to the trap of inertia and ineffectiveness.

Ignoring the need of solutions which would be viable and acceptable to all Member States may result in the so-called "two- or multi-speed Europe". That is a scenario which in my view would pose a great threat to the whole concept of European unity and I fear that it would mark the beginning of an end to the EU. Therefore it is a responsibility of all EU Members to act maturely and seek genuine compromises on core issues.

The future of the EU has to be discussed among all the Member States. The core principle of the Union should be "Free men with free men, on equal terms with all".

The genuine needs of each of the Member States and their peoples have to be placed back at the heart of the integration process. The EU must become more democratic and bring more benefits to its citizens. The subsidiarity principle should again become the central philosophy of the EU apparatus - "European where necessary, national where possible".

The European Commission should go back to its original role and serve exclusively as an executive body which focuses on making the Single Market a reality. In order to instill the European process within European nations, we have to strengthen the role of national parliaments in the law-making process.

5.

In this context, I would argue that the sovereign decision of the British people taken on the 23rd of June 2016 and the difficult process of negotiating the divorce bill between the EU and the UK should not only focus on shaping the future relationship between the two sides. In my view this painful exercise should also be used by the EU as opportunity to review and reform itself internally.

6.

That brings me to Brexit.

Poland fully respects the democratic decision made by the British people on June 2016. Although, we would rather have the UK remain within the European Union as our two countries share views on the whole array of European affairs – from a liberal approach in economy, fiscal policy and regulation to addressing major challenges in EU's neighbourhood.

However, the process of Britain leaving the EU is a reality and is taking place right now.

Such a scenario has never been experienced before and it has created a huge sense of uncertainty for many – for people, for enterprises and for institutions. We do not know on what terms the UK will cease to be a member and we do not know what the future shape of relations between the EU and the UK will be.

From the Polish perspective, it is of utmost importance to have both sides refrain from any hostile discourse and ensure that the negotiations be conducted in a professional and amicable manner. Although we consider Brexit a potential threat to Europe's global position, it is in the interest of all of us not to damage the very foundations of European cooperation which are trust, good-will and the sense of civilizational unity among individual nations and states.

It is obvious to all that the UK will continue to be a pivotal partner both for the EU as a whole and for Poland, in all possible terms.

Both sides need each other in the political and economic sense, we have to cooperate in the fields of security, as are exposed to the same defense threats and we want our countries - academics, artists, students and experts in various professions to work with each other. That will not change, Brexit or not...

All the issues which need to be addressed when talking on the terms of UK departure from the EU are politically very sensitive just to name the most obvious ones – financial commitments, legal status of EU and UK citizens, the Irish border, the legal framework of future economic activities (look at aviation...), access to research and universities, agriculture and fisheries, cooperation in justice and home affairs.

From Poland's point of view, and with more than 900 thousand Poles living in the UK, securing their future legal status is to the Polish Government of utmost importance.

We are very clear – the rights of Polish nationals who already live here should be respected also after 29th of March 2019. And so should be the rights of the British nationals residing in the EU.

Despite the fact that formally this matter has not yet been agreed, basing on numerous statements by the Prime Minister Theresa May, the Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson and the State Secretary for Brexit Mr. David Davis, I am convinced that also Her Majesty's Government wants to resolve the matter in a constructive manner as the enormously positive input of those EU citizens who have come to the UK are highly appreciated.

7.

Polish – British relations go well beyond the EU or NATO frameworks and have a rich history going back centuries, to the very beginnings of our two countries, one thousand years back when King Canute the Great ruled over England (1017-35), the grandson of the first documented Polish ruler, Mieszko the First.

Over the centuries there have been many trade contacts between England and Scotland and the Polish Crown. A substantial English merchant community settled in Northern Poland (Elbląg and Gdańsk) since the 14th century and a significant Scottish community settled in various cities of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from the 16th to 18th centuries.

However, it was the joint struggle against the Nazi Germany during the Second World War which has especially forged our political relations. As I mentioned earlier, Poles fought alongside the British in almost every war arena in Europe and beyond that – during the Battle of Britain, in Norway, in North Africa, in Italy, and from 1944 in the Second Front. The work of our cryptologists was instrumental in breaking the German Enigma codes at Bletchley Park. Not to mention that our Government in Exile found a safe refuge in London for decades from the outbreak of World War II to the transformation in 1989.

After the war, as a consequence of the Yalta Conference, Poland was subject to the Soviet sphere of interests, as a result many Polish war veterans stayed in the UK or went further to migrate to other Commonwealth countries. The Polish Government in Exile remained in London, and although recognition and support for it was eventually withdrawn by the British government, it had been a guarantee of Poland's continuity all the way up to 1990, when the then-President of Poland in Exile Ryszard Kaczorowski handed over the insignia of power to the first democratically elected President of the 3rd Republic, Lech Wałęsa.

Since the democratic transformation in Poland, our relations have been further strengthened, with Poland's membership in NATO (1999) and the EU (2004) bringing it onto new heights.

Today, these close ties included are exemplified in very intensive political relations, including annual intergovernmental consultations, which were held for the first time in November 2016, and will be organized in December later this year in Warsaw. We are honoured to be the only European country apart from France to enjoy such a framework with our British friends.

Our businesses cooperate closely and the UK has been for years been among the top ten trading partners for Poland. There is a growing number of British companies investing in Poland but also of Polish companies entering the UK market – with brands such as Reserved and Inglot paving their way into the British high streets. There are vibrant academic contacts which we want to foster ever further.

And most importantly, Poland and Britain are committed to support direct people-to-people contacts. Along the IGC, the Belvedere Forum has been launched, a platform of dialogue

among representatives of various parts of civil society, academia, businesses aimed at fostering these ties even closer.

Therefore, while regretting the British decision on leaving the EU, Poland looks with optimism to the future cooperation with the United Kingdom, one of our most important European friends and allies.

Thank you for your attention.