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• European Council | Speech | 13 November 2019 21:30

Keynote speech by President Donald Tusk at the opening ceremony of the 2019/2020 academic year at the College of Europe

I want to first thank the Rector of the College of Europe, Jörg Monar, both for the invitation and for the masterful lecture on the life and thought of Hannah Arendt that he has just presented. Thank you, Professor, for your hospitality and for setting the scene so well, especially in view of what I have to say today.



When I heard that this year's College of Europe promotion was dedicated to Hannah Arendt, and that I was invited to inaugurate the academic year, I was more than happy for two reasons. Firstly, because Arendt is an intellectual heroine for me. And secondly, because we are in the magnificent city of Bruges. Even if not formally, it is a sister city to Gdańsk, my hometown. Both are in competition for the title of Venice of the North. Both are ancient arteries of European trade, where north and south met in medieval

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It is therefore no surprise that during the handover ceremony on 1st December 2014, in my very short, two-minute speech, I mentioned the word "unity" three times. My message was this: "What Europe needs is protecting our fundamental values: solidarity, freedom, unity against the threats to the EU and its unity, coming from both inside and outside. Politics has returned to Europe, history is back, and such times need leadership and political unity." I told you I was obsessed with unity.

My exercises in unity started practically on day one. First, it was about the Kremlin's aggressive policy. I was (and still am) convinced that, in this game, what is at stake, is not only the future of independent Ukraine and the security of Central Europe, including that of my country, but the sovereignty of Europe as a political entity. And I had no doubt that Putin's strategic goal was not only to regain control of the former Soviet Union territories, but also to systematically weaken the EU by provoking internal divisions. I had to publicly remind others, almost every week, that Russia is not our "strategic partner", but our "strategic problem". I was even labelled a "monomaniac", for being so focused on this subject. But eventually it paid off. We maintained our unity, also in terms of sanctions, throughout my entire term.