



Reconciling Central, Eastern and Western Europe historical memories to build a stronger Union

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Speaker

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear panellists,

Dear members,

Dear guests,

I will not make a long speech as we have an interesting topic to discuss here today and not a lot of time, but I wanted to say a few words of introduction, to explain to you the reason I have chosen the particular topic for today's discussion and why it is taking place in this beautiful room in the centre of the Jagiellonian University and in the centre of Krakow (which is of course the centre of Poland – I hope there is no one from Warsaw in this room!).

This has been a dream in the making for me since I first came to Krakow and was introduced to the wonderful history of this city by the Director of ZNAK, Henryk Wozniakowski. But even before I came, I was fascinated by Krakow as the place where Pope John Paul the Second lived and worked, and from where, with his help, the resistance to the communist regime flourished.

In his encyclical “Ut Unum Sint,” St. John Paul II wrote that “the Church must breathe with her two lungs,” referring to East and West. This idea was reflected in President Juncker's State of the Union speech last year, where he spoke of the Right and Left Lungs of Europe.

The idea of today's panel is the fruit of a long reflection on my side as to why there seems to be a certain difference of perception in the “Western” and “Eastern” countries of the European Union of the European project and their place in it still today, fourteen years after accession. The Central and Eastern European countries have joined the single market and the Schengen zone. These are concrete landmarks of integration, but only of its economic and political side. Have we had a historical, emotional integration? An integration of values, of memories?

At the time of the enlargement of 2004, Western Europe assumed Eastern Europe could simply be absorbed into the western system of values and historical memory and would perfectly adapt to it. We never asked ourselves whether some adjustment, some soul-searching needed to be done also by Western Europe in order for the two ‘lungs’ to breathe harmoniously together. Having talked to some Polish friends I have a feeling that the Eastern European nations saw their EU accession as something that was due to them, not because they were able to fulfil the Copenhagen criteria but because firstly, they had never ceased to be European, even behind the iron curtain, and secondly, the Europe that had turned her back on them at Potsdam and Yalta, had a moral obligation to welcome them back.

Poland is an excellent example of this. Until 1989 it was a communist country, not because of a choice to be one, but because of a decision of the Great Coalition. Those 60 years saw a civil war, the terror of the Stalinist era, the collectivisation of agriculture, authoritarian communist rule, the martial law of 1981-83 and finally the peaceful transition of 1989. It is only a few days ago that Poland celebrated 29 years since the first partially democratic elections. It is not by chance that during those communist years, the only “free”, clandestine radio station in the communist block was called “Radio Free Europe”. Communist block nations were perhaps expecting a more profound accession, based on an understanding of their history during the communist era, their specific cultural perspective, and not only an economic pact.

This is why we are here today in Krakow, to try to talk freely about our history, our cultures and our expectations for the future of the European Union. I hope these exchanges, along with other points on our rich agenda in Poland, will inspire us for the discussions on the EESC role in the Future of Europe debate which we will have in the afternoon. We have planned our stay in Krakow in a way to be able to gain a different perspective on the European debate, to enrich it with a Central European flavour.

Yesterday we visited Kazimierz, the Jewish quarter, and the old Synagogue. We had the privilege to hear the Director of the Krakow Historical Museum talk about the Jewish history of the city. Tomorrow we will visit

Auschwitz, which is a part of European history we should all be aware of and which we should never forget lest it happens again.

This afternoon, we will be discussing the role of our Committee in the couple of years to come, how the EESC can best contribute to the Future of Europe Debate, the European elections, the priorities of the new European Commission. I think it is of crucial importance to have this debate here. Because in order to develop and thrive, the European Union needs both its lungs to work in harmony. And such harmony can only be achieved through dialogue, through understanding and respecting each other's historical memories, through cultural exchange. I feel there is a depth of cultural richness in central and Eastern Europe, which has not yet been fully understood in other parts of our continent. It is not by chance that we will hold our internal discussions this afternoon in the International Cultural Centre, which is the coordinator of the European Year of Cultural Heritage in Poland and where we will hear about various cultural initiatives the MCK is organising.

So this was an explanation as to why this topic. And why in Krakow?

As I have said at the beginning of my speech, this city holds a special place in my heart because of the legacy of Pope John Paul the Second and his role in the modern history of Poland. But of course Krakow is the symbol of much more than that: it houses one of the oldest universities in Europe; it was the capital of Poland for many centuries. It is the seat of the Archbishop and the burial place of Polish kings. It has been home to a vibrant Jewish community.

Last but not least, it has a unique place on the cultural map of Poland. The historical centre and Kazimierz were part of the first UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites in 1978. It is the home of many famous artists and writers: Jan Matejko, Stanislaw Wyspianski, Wislawa Szymborska, Czeslaw Milosz, Slawomir Mrozek, Stanislaw Lem – the list is long. It is a place where many cultural movements, such as Mloda Polska, started. More recently, in 2000, Krakow held the title of European Capital of Culture, and in 2013 the title of UNESCO Capital of Literature.

But as we are here between friends I will reveal the real reason: Krakow has a special link to Italy from the times of Bona Sforza. It was the queen who brought renaissance to Krakow with the works of Bartolomeo Berrecci or Francesco Fiorentino who changed the Wawel Castle. The famous Sukiennice also bear witness to Italian style. And what would you do without pasta (makaron), pomidory or kalafior? Even today Italian artists love Poland – the design of the Modern Art Museum of Krakow is done by Claudio Nardi, for example. And Polish artists love Italy: Jerzy Stuhr played in two films by Nanni Moretti and the sculptures of Igor Mintoraj can be admired on Italian piazzas, to name just two examples.

So let us build on these cultural and historical exchanges, today and in the future.

I will now give the floor to professor Mach, our host here at the Jagiellonian University and the moderator of our panel. My special thanks go to him for hosting us in this very special place. I would also like to thank Professor Hausner from the University of Economics for his help in organising this event and our other two illustrious panellists, Professor Purchla and Ambassador Vasaryova, for sharing their knowledge with us today.

Find more information on the enlarged Presidency meeting in Krakow [here](#)