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Tusk: 'It is simply too late to impeach Donald, at least the European one'

In candid speech, outgoing Council president says he fought for EU unity and warns UK will be 'a second-rate player' after Brexit .

By **DAVID M. HERSZENHORN** | 11/13/19, 10:20 PM CET | Updated 11/14/19, 4:54 AM CET



Donald Tusk, President of the European Council | Sean Gallup/Getty Images

Donald is now a very lame duck — Donald Tusk, that is — and he feels free to speak his mind.

On Wednesday night, the outgoing European Council president used his newfound liberty to give a speech that criticized Germany and the Netherlands for being "overly tough" with Greece during its debt crisis, that rebuked Emmanuel Macron for recent remarks about Russia, and that savaged the U.K. over Brexit.

"After its departure, the U.K. will become an outsider, a second-rate player, while the main battlefield will be occupied by China, the U.S. and the EU," Tusk said, quoting unnamed commentators from across the globe. He a [Privacy Settings](#)

English friends is probably right when he says with melancholy that Brexit is the real end of the British Empire."

If anyone didn't like what he said, well, too bad.

"Today, it is simply too late to impeach Donald — at least the European one," he said to huge applause from his audience at the College of Europe in Bruges.

“ "The EU27 have maintained extraordinary self-discipline and loyalty among themselves" on Brexit — *Donald Tusk*

In his speech, Tusk riffed on the theme of "unity" — describing that as his main mission throughout his five years acting as convener and choreographer of summits of the EU's 28 heads of state and government.

Tusk opened his remarks by talking about two of his heroines, the philosopher Hannah Arendt, and the former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.



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Tusk quoted Thatcher's own speech at the College of Europe, for the same event opening the academic year, in 1988 — back when he was still an anti-communist activist in his native Poland.

"We must never forget that, east of the Iron Curtain, peoples who once enjoyed a full share of European culture, freedom and identity have been cut off from their roots," Thatcher said. "We shall always look on Warsaw, Prague and Budapest as great European cities."

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Tusk, left, with Britain's Prime Minister, Boris Johnson in August | Pool photo by Andrew Parsons/Getty Images

Tusk picked up the theme: "Two months later, I welcomed her together with Lech Wałęsa and Polish workers outside the Gdańsk shipyard. On that day we had a feeling that the Iron Curtain was about to fall and that a new era of freedom and unity was coming."

Tusk then turned to his theme of unity, which he said had been "a leitmotif, a task, almost my obsession, from the very beginning" of his first two-and-a-half-year term in 2014.

He said his first challenge was to keep EU leaders unified in response to military aggression by Russia, including the invasion and annexation of Ukraine's Crimea, and he expressed satisfaction that the EU had held firm on economic sanctions all the way through his tenure.

Tusk then turned to the unity of the eurozone during the financial crisis, insisting that he had helped protect Greece against the harsher instincts of Germany and the Netherlands, which risked Athens abandoning the common currency.

"As a typical representative of the 'Northern school,' I have always believed that you shouldn't spend more than you have," he said. "But despite this belief, I protected

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the Greeks from the overly tough and, at times, orthodox approach of the Germans or the Dutch."

He gave himself credit for forcing German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras to negotiate through the night of July 12, 2015, and boasted that four hours later they were able to announce what he called "our aGreekment."

Others might have a different recollection of those events, but Tusk did not dwell.

“Germany and France are bigger than Malta or Lithuania, but that doesn't mean that they are more right” — *Donald Tusk*

He moved on instead to migration policy, in which he claimed to have helped strike a balance between Merkel's initial open-arms approach and the Fortress Europe position favored by leaders like Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. While the migration crisis has eased, the EU is no closer to resolving its bitter disagreements over migration and asylum policy, which will now be left for Tusk's successor, former Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel, to help settle.

On Brexit, Tusk noted that the U.K. would be a member of the EU through his full term, which ends on November 30, but he expressed no joy.

"I will not pretend that this is some kind of success, because Brexit may happen at the beginning of next year," he said. "I did everything in my power to avoid the confrontational no-deal scenario and extend the time for reflection and a possible British change of heart. I have been called a romantic and an anglophile, both terms, in my opinion, quite suitable and merited. Most importantly, however, Brexit hasn't divided us."

In one of his stronger criticisms, he chastized all three of the British leaders he had worked with for trying to divide the bloc.

"The EU27 have maintained extraordinary self-discipline and loyalty among themselves, despite London's attempts to 'bilateralize' these negotiations," he said. "That was the case with Prime Minister [David] Cameron, with Prime Minister [Theresa] May, and that is now the case with Prime Minister [Boris] Johnson."

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French President Emmanuel Macron with Tusk at the Elysee Palace in Paris | Ludovic Marin/AFP via Getty Images

But he also had sharp words for some leaders that he considers friends and allies, like Macron. He decried those who had advocated for a "multi-speed Europe" in which some countries might opt for closer cooperation while others refrained, saying that it would result in little more than a return to the days of the Iron Curtain when the Continent was divided.

"Paris was particularly active here, paradoxically especially after the election of President Macron, a sincere and energetic European," Tusk said, adding: "I cannot accept the return of a multispeed Europe. I spent half of my life behind the Iron Curtain, in the Soviet sphere, under the Communist regime, so I know very well what a two-speed Europe really means."

Later in the speech, Tusk pointedly rebuked Macron over remarks in a recent interview with the Economist, in which the French president said the EU should rethink its views on Russia — a move that Tusk warned could cost the EU its sovereignty.

"President Macron says that he shares the same views on this subject as Viktor Orbán, and that he hopes that Mr. Orbán will help convince Poles to change their position on Russia," Tusk said. "But not me, Emmanuel."

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European Commission President-elect Ursula von der Leyen meets Tusk | Oliver Hoslet/AFP via Getty Images

Tusk also said that part of his job was to protect the rights of small EU countries. "Germany and France are bigger than Malta or Lithuania, but that doesn't mean that they are more right. At least not always," Tusk said, noting that his goal as Council president was to give each country its fair hearing. "After all," he teased, "even the Germans are sometimes right."

Toward the end of the speech, after joking that he could not be impeached, Tusk returned even more candidly to the topic of Brexit, saying he still hoped it would be reversed.

"I have heard repeatedly from Brexiters that they wanted to leave the European Union to make the United Kingdom great again, believing that only alone, it can truly be great," he said. "You could hear in these voices a longing for the Empire. But the reality is exactly the opposite. Only as part of a united Europe can the U.K. play a global role.

"The U.K. election takes place in one month," Tusk added. "Can things still be turned around? Hannah Arendt taught that things become irreversible only when people start to think so. So the only words that come to my mind today are simply:

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Don't give up. In this match, we are already in extra time, perhaps it will even go to penalties."

In one of the personal touches in the speech, Tusk said he kept a handmade poster in his office that he would leave behind for Michel. It says: "It's the unity, stupid."

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