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Speech by the President at the 76th Session of the UN General Assembly

Distinguished Mr. Secretary General,
Distinguished Mr. President,
Excellencies, Distinguished Heads of States and Nations,
Esteemed Delegates,

I congratulate His Excellency Mr. Abdulla Shahid on his election to the honorable function of the President of the 76th session of the UN General Assembly. I would like to express Poland's full support for his mission and wish every success in its execution. I also want to thank His Excellency Mr. Volkan Bozkır for his active presidency over the works of the General Assembly in the previous session.

Furthermore, I am grateful to Secretary General Mr. António Guterres for developing the report entitled "Our Common Agenda", which provides a comprehensive response to the most pressing challenges faced by the world today. Just like Mr. Secretary General I see the need for international solidarity in the Covid-19 vaccination process, just like him I can see the need for action on the climate crisis and the protection of biodiversity.

As participant of numerous debates, I can also see an increasing consciousness of mainly young people who realize that the decisions taken today will have an immense impact on our lives. It is particularly heartening to me to see this trend, to see that young people realize the challenge.

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am standing before you as a leader of a 38-million-strong Nation who, just like all our states, has been facing up to an unprecedented pandemic and all its consequences for almost two years now. Over the period of 20 months, we have lost 75 thousand lives while almost 3 out of 38 million people in our country have contracted the virus. Although our robust economy bravely resisted the crisis and has managed to come back to an exceptionally dynamic growth today, during the first year of the pandemic it failed, for the first time in 30 years, to record such growth. I do not need to explain to you, the leaders of states, what it means for millions of families since you know the situation first-hand.

I am standing before you as one of more than 200 million people who have recovered from Covid-19, the ones who contracted the virus and have managed to recover. Like surely many of you present here I went through the illness which befalls people irrespective of their function, status, religion, convictions, orientation, and world views.

The past 20 months of fight against the pandemic reminded us of a word which we in Poland know since the cradle. That word is "solidarity". Many of you know what I am talking about. This name refers in our history to a large independent trade union established in 1980 by workers in the plants who went on strike against the communist regime, and who in the 1980's and 1990's inspired millions of people across the globe in their fight for the democratic or labor rights. This word has come to be a symbolic guiding principle of our policy, its ideal.

Speaking about solidarity I am also thinking about solidarity in the context of COVID-19. And this reflection is by no means an easy one. Especially in reference to us, the leaders of the rich world, of the affluent North, as it is sometimes termed.

Did we show enough solidarity? Did the mankind behave in the right manner throughout its fight against the virus? Did we offer help to each other as we should be doing according to our basic moral instinct as humans? Well, one could have serious doubts on that count.

Did we, the rich North (since my country despite all its daily problems belongs to the limited group of affluent states) demonstrate the necessary solidarity with the countries of the South? Did we have an equal access to vaccines and other measures preventing the spread of the disease?

When the threat came, it was our first instinct to isolate ourselves from each other. Borders reemerged in Europe. Those were justified actions as none of us knew back then how serious the danger would really be. The situation was further exacerbated by the reports about tens of thousands of those infected and deceased. Every one of us remembers the horror of the first months of 2020, the huge hopes we attached to the development of a vaccine which would protect us from the disease. However, it is today, almost 2 years on with over 4.5 million casualties, that we should answer the question how well we passed the solidarity test.

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Distinguished Leaders,
Esteemed Delegates,

I salute those who won the vaccine battle in laboratories and those who, risking their own health and lives, vaccinated hundreds of millions of the co-habitants of our planet! But was the access to vaccines fair? Did we not forget that in a pandemic situation a vaccine is more of a human right than a commodity regulated by market principles?

I wanted Poland to be, right from the start, a country of solidarity, a country not guided by the rule: the weaker has to die. Therefore, we tried to protect each and every life with the same commitment. Therefore, whenever we could, we tried to show solidarity with other nations who needed assistance at a given time. I am not able to say whether we did everything possible but still we tried for instance by sending our medical doctors to our friends in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan as well as the USA and I Europe to the suffering Italy. I am convinced that some of the countries of the rich North behaved the same way as Poland, who donated 6 million doses of vaccines to inter alia our partners from the South. But was that enough to close the obvious gap in the access to vaccines which got wasted in some states and were inaccessible in others? It seems to me that our part of humanity still has many reasons to be dissatisfied with itself.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Honorable Delegates,

The word "solidarity" does not refer exclusively to the pandemic, whereas the pandemic did not make other global problems disappear.

We are discussing the rights of nations in this forum. Let me ask you then: what is the first right of every nation? It is the right to self-determination and the right to democratic governance set out in detail in the science of democratization and enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights adopted by the UN. I am absolutely sure that most of us agree on the fact that each of our nations, the United Nations, has to right to protect its borders, to their inviolability, to choose its system of government and to govern with the consent of the nation, and never against it.

Ladies and Gentlemen, do we really agree with that?

Since I have an impression, and it is not only my impression, that Covid-19 allowed us to easily forget about multiple misfortunes plaguing different parts of our globe, often in the vicinity of our homes.

During the pandemic reports of the tragedy in Syria, where an externally supported civil war has inflicted unimaginable suffering on the population and turned millions of people into refugees and fugitives, vanished from the

headlines.

The tragedies in Libya, Ethiopia and Yemen are barely noticed by many people from the rich North. During Covid-19 we did not move any closer to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which requires, as we probably all know, a two-state, peaceful solution.

Unfortunately, tragic developments are unfolding also close to the Polish border and I have the impression that humanity seems to have forgotten about them.

And yet, the pandemic has not stopped the war in Ukraine where over 13 thousand people died since the beginning of the Russian aggression with one state seizing the territory of another. In Europe after World War 2, in the 21st century, Ukraine has been assaulted.

What was the response of the rich North to the drama of the Ukrainian nation fighting for its independence? The response was the construction of a large Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline which will carry Russian gas to Western Europe bringing further billions in revenue to the aggressor, and complete helplessness or even indifference to the fact that from that moment on Ukraine will find itself in an even bigger danger.

Recently I have attended the Crimea Platform Summit in Kiev being one of few leaders representing the rich North. I searched with my eyes for those who have constructed and approved the construction of Nord Stream 2. I did not find them.

Covid-19 also obscures to many people the events in neighboring Belarus, where since August 2020 hundreds of thousands of people have come out daily for peaceful protests demanding just one thing: respect for the election result. In response they encountered police batons, tear gas and, often times, bullets used by the regime to defend itself against its own people.

As I speak, 650 persons are in prisons in Belarus, the majority of them young women and men, patriots, who simply wanted to choose their leader in fair elections. They suffer imprisonment for political reasons. A kangaroo court has lately sentenced two of them – Marya Kalesnikava and Maxim Znak - to 10 and 11 years in prison respectively. Along with them the leaders of the Polish minority in Belarus – Andželika Borys and Andrzej Poczobut – are either detained or imprisoned for their democratic activity. These are just a few names from among hundreds of those persecuted. We demand release of them all and expect greater solidarity from the international community with the people of Belarus who simply call for a fair state and fair democracy.

What have these people done that was so wrong? Nothing. They wanted to claim the same right to elect their government that the French, the Poles, the Americans, the Koreans, the Australians, or the people of Argentina or of the United States have. They wanted free elections, in which many of us run, the Presidents of the free world and the importance of which the UN General Assembly so emphatically expressed in a series of historic resolutions: “Enhancing the effectiveness of the principle of periodic and genuine elections”. In the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, they paved the way for the realization that the right to form one’s own government is not some Western whim but a universal human right. What the people of Belarus want to insist to their authorities that this very fundamental right be respected. The price they pay for this demand is suffering, and imprisonment.

I am saying all of this as a leader of a country where almost 150 thousand Belarusians have found shelter and employment, including thousands of protesters. I have recently told our Belarusian brothers that they are welcome here and that Poland will be their home for as long as they deem it appropriate and necessary. I firmly uphold these words.

But solidarity comes at a price. Because regimes tend to defend themselves not only against their own citizens but also against democratic states.

The response of the authoritarian regime in Belarus has taken the shape of an unprecedented hybrid attack on the borders of Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania, the three countries on the eastern flank of NATO and the European Union. For many weeks, the regime of Alexander Lukashenko has been bringing tens of thousands of desperate inhabitants of the Middle East into its country, forcing them under police batons to cross our borders in an attempt to create an artificial "humanitarian crisis." These people then camp out at the border, and the regime is deaf to our offers to provide them with humanitarian aid. The regime treats these people: the immigrants as pawns in a political game, and their dignity and fundamental rights are offended.

In this crisis, we will not succumb because on our part, there is no agreement to instrumental treatment of migrants, no agreement to the abuse of their vulnerable situation pitched against the security of our borders; the borders we have a duty to protect, also as a member state of the European Community guarding its border.

I am saying this also as a leader of a country that knows very well how to tell the difference between a humanitarian crisis and hybrid activities; the country which, together with its allies, participated in the refugee rescue operation in Kabul airport just a few weeks ago. Initially, our intention was to evacuate dozens of military and diplomatic staff who cooperated with us. We ended up evacuating over one thousand people. We helped other countries to exfil their own people, but we also benefited from the solidarity shown by others, particularly by the Republic of Uzbekistan, for which we are profoundly grateful.

I am saying this to remind you once again that the world did not come to a standstill during the pandemic. The pandemic has not deprived nations of their democratic aspirations, nor has it stifled people's desire to live in freedom. Nor has it suppressed the craving for dignity and respect across large swathes of the globe. I recently saw myself the enthusiasm among the Moldovan voters, who took power away from the oligarchs plundering the country and voted in favor of reforms, democracy, and normality. I assured them of Poland's support for any initiative of the kind in our region, wherever we can have influence.

Because these are moments that restore faith in the most fundamental values of humanity and inspire the spirit of profound solidarity in other countries, my own included.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Esteemed Delegates, Dear Friends,

Trivial as it may sound, we all realize that the mankind is not homogeneous and each of us has his or her own world of values, beliefs, and things that are important, sacrosanct to us. But the experience of sharing the same planet and the knowledge that we have no other, teach us coexistence and prompt us to define the framework thereof.

International law is such a framework: it is one of the greatest achievements of modern times. We can debate at length about reforming the UN system, but each of such debates comes down to one thing: how to promote the United Nations' role in securing the primacy of international law. Because we want to live in a world founded on force of law, not on law of the force.

Securing respect for international law was one of Poland's priorities as a member of the Security Council in 2018-2019. Today we continue in the same vein, in support of international law, by serving in the Human Rights Council.

Our priority is to protect particularly vulnerable groups: civilians in armed conflicts or religious minorities.

The same purpose will be pursued by the Polish chairpersonship of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe in 2022, where we want to work for the resolution of regional and frozen conflicts. We want to tap OSCE potential to improve the conditions of the weakest and most vulnerable people. We will also strive to make human rights the main point of reference for OSCE activities, perceiving that solidarity is the fundamental value underlying human rights, the rights enjoyed by every human being.

Dear Delegates, Esteemed Fellow Leaders of the World,

The pandemic has nearly removed from the headlines another major topic - the fight against climate change, the fight for a secure future for all of us, for our children and grandchildren.

We, the leaders, must realize what it takes to protect people and the planet from climate change. This problem will not disappear together with the pandemic. It is, it must also be part of international solidarity.

Let me pose this question once again: do we, the rich North, pass the test of solidarity, or do we merely cater to our own statistics by relocating production to the poorer countries of the South where least environment friendly technologies are applied. And then those countries are blamed for contaminating the planet.

I am saying this as a leader of a country that overthrew the communist dictatorship in 1989 and inherited a very difficult ecological situation in the aftermath. Over the last thirty years we have made tremendous progress on that count. Between 1988 and 2016 Poland reduced its carbon dioxide emissions by more than 30%, our rivers and air have become cleaner and the country greener and with more forests. All in all, being a country of primeval forests, woods, great lakes and rivers, every year Poland attracts many lovers of nature from all over Europe.

I could also add that the share of hard coal in our energy mix is systematically decreasing, with biofuels and renewable energy sources gaining ground, but at this point, let me humbly admit that this is only the beginning of the road, the long road ahead of us. I do believe that we will make it. In this context. We are very ambitious and we do realize the challenges of the future.

Indeed, during our presidency of COP24 we managed to finalize negotiations of the Katowice Rulebook, an agreement that streamlines the implementation of the Paris Agreement so as to make it transparent and fair to all parties. It is also fair to say that we supported the transformation of our energy sector with due respect to the socio-economic context. But at the same time, we realize that more effort will be needed. Therefore, in February this year, the Polish government gave a seal of approval to the "Energy Policy of Poland until 2040", which maps out the directions of energy transformation. The document is an important step towards low- and zero-emission transition in Polish economy. It is my firm belief that in the name of solidarity the strategy will be further implemented by the government of my successor-in-office. And that will be done in due respect of the central tenet of "just transition": transition that considers social needs, capabilities, the need to secure people's dignified life, to secure employment and means to raise children in dignified conditions. A transition that respects the interests of the family.

Honorable Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Solidarity has not ceased to exist in the face of a pandemic. It should continue to be our motto and our central tenet together with others: not to compromise on human rights and the rights of entire nations, to secure the development of the UN, always in due respect of the primacy of international law, and to be ready to set and pursue ambitious goals in the struggle for our planet.

In the last 20 months when the pandemic weighed so heavily on us, we have often asked ourselves: what will the post-pandemic world be like? Will it be the world of solidarity? Or shall we resume business as usual and consider that these months have been nothing more than an interruption in our routine, after which we can go on repeating our old mistakes?

Personally, I believe that the mankind shares the same aspirations: security and prosperity, living in dignified conditions, democracy and human rights, a world without wars and violations of borders, nations respecting each other's territories, languages and identities, a world without discrimination, without offence of inherent dignity of human beings, a world that consistently endorses the principles invoked by the authors of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. A world based on solidarity among people and states.

I believe that Poland will be always striving for such a world, no matter who holds the office of its president, myself or my successor in office, a woman, or a man.

Thank you for your attention!

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