

The Open Society and European Decline: A View from Poland

by [Christopher Garbowski](#) (April 2025)



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In the final year of communism in Poland, political philosopher Ryszard Legutko felt the exhilarating spirit of freedom in the air caused by the sense of anticipation of what was expected to come. In retrospect, he notes how quickly this feeling dissipated once the country was actually free. As he describes it in his book *The Demon in Democracy* (2016), the first blow was the “rhetoric of necessity” that the liberal democratic system carried with it. Soon he learned this was not simply limited to the problems associated with his country

adapting to the new social order. Early in the new century the country became a member of the European Union. It was a time the EU was the center of great optimism near and far. British author Mark Leonard vividly expressed this spirit in his book *Why Europe Will Run the 21st Century* (2005). Legutko, however, soon learned what was beneath the glimmering surface of the EU. "I saw up close what—from a distance—escapes the attention of many observers," he notes: "If the European Parliament is supposed to be the emanation of the spirit of today's liberal democracy, then this spirit is neither good nor beautiful: it has many bad and ugly features, some of which, unfortunately, it shares with the spirit of communism."

Over time not a few of the more perceptive political minds in Poland, especially those who remember the communist era, have similarly noted that problem in the European Union. On May 9th, the organization celebrates Europe Day. That is the day one of the founding fathers of the EU, Robert Schuman, gave a speech celebrating "peace and unity in Europe" which became known as the Schuman Declaration. Since 1999, the Polish Schuman Foundation, established in 1991, had organized annual parades on that day even before it was declared a holiday. Yet in his book, *Czy Unia Europejska przetrwa rok 2024? (Will the European Union survive 2024?)*, Dariusz Lipiński, who became a member of the Polish parliament when the country was already a member of the EU for a couple of years, now argues "today's highly secularized, leftist liberal and politically correct European Union is in no way reminiscent of its founding father's ideals."

The question arises why is this so. One of the statements from the Schuman Declaration gives some idea of how the spirit in Europe ended up so different from what the author himself had hoped would result from his efforts of building the European community that eventually became the EU. He stated: "The gathering of the nations of Europe demands the elimination of the age-old antagonism of France and Germany." Basically, the

EU in its earlier iterations was created to prevent the Europeans from killing each other, which is what they had done with for centuries. And this was especially a pressing hope after the horrors of the Second World War. But the spirit in the air and how it developed was essentially counter to his solutions, especially in the long run. As N.S. Lyon puts it in his [essay](#) "American Strong Gods: Trump and the End of the Long Twentieth Century," published in his substack *The Upheaval* blog,

In the wake of the horrors inflicted by WWII, the leadership classes of America and Europe understandably made "never again" the core of their ideational universe. They collectively resolved that fascism, war, and genocide must never again be allowed to threaten humanity. But this resolution, as reasonable and well-meaning as it seemed at the time, soon became an all-consuming obsession with negation.

This is where the likes of Karl Popper received tremendous leeway to convince the post-war establishment in the West of the dangers of the "closed society," in which it was surmised that authoritarianism thrived and spread out. Lyon notes that in his landmark and highly influential book of 1945, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Popper "denounced the idea of national community entirely, labeling it as disastrous 'anti-humanitarian propaganda' and smearing anyone who dared cherish as special his own homeland and history as a dangerous 'racialist.'" In opposition to all the allegedly negative symptoms of the past, a vague idea of an open society was to be promoted. And, as Lyon puts it, "Aspiration to a vague universal humanitarianism soon became the only higher good that it was socially acceptable to aim for other than pure economic growth." He goes on to argue the result of this was

the weakening of communal bonds while what traditionally made-up self-governance was eventually transformed to a top-down technocratic management.

If we generally accept causal thrust of this analysis, the results of a humanitarian vision negating past values in the name of an anti-fascist crusade opens the doors to stunted democracy, which if anything greatly expanded after the conclusion of the Cold War. Lyon argues that consequently the “crusade for openness took on a great commission to go and deconstruct all nations in the name of peace, prosperity and freedom.” This can especially be observed in the European Union, in which scholars have long noted a democratic deficit, that is increasing through the increasingly radical centralization and corresponding attack on national sovereignty, and which JD Vance dramatically [pointed out](#) to the European elite during the Munich Security Conference in February 2025. Moreover, there is the problem of ignoring the real world until it is exceedingly late. It is “laughable” to talk about Trump’s treatment of NATO without considering Europe’s “delusion” around defense spending in the last 60 years, states the London *Times*’ journalist Matthew Syed, who sensibly places a good deal of the blame on how long the war has lasted and the tragedy of Ukrainians on this lack of military preparation on the part of Europe, who should have been prepared for such an invasion. Instead there was a naïve reset with Russia after the imperial power took over Crimea in 2014.

Such a perspective on the evolution of the centralist problem does not exclude more typical views that point to the current predominantly liberal-leftist Eurocrats underpinning it. Lipiński, for instance, notes the European Commission’s *White Paper on the Future of Europe* from 2017 as indicating Altiero Spinnelli, coauthor of the Ventotene Manifesto of 1941, as a father of the European Union—Robert Schuman among others was not mentioned. The author point out the Italian communist

creates a vision of European unity based on the cultural Marxism of the Gramsci school. But there is another reason alongside the ideological one the Brussels Eurocrats are so fond of Spinnelli, which can be termed pragmatism, and includes “a corporate version,” which Lipiński argues his “views provide an ideal justification for undertaking decisions for the activities of Eurocrats without taking into account citizens, without any democratic legitimacy.” This is the juncture where the open society from Lyon’s perspective and Vance’s critique of Europe are in unison.

With regards to the problem of restrictions on free speech, Vance insisted the European political elite need to have the courage to listen to views they do not hold or acknowledge voting in a manner they do not approve of: “I was struck that a former European commissioner went on television recently and sounded delighted that the Romanian government had just annulled an entire election. He warned that if things don’t go to plan, the very same thing could happen in Germany too.” In concluding his speech, he cited Saint John Paul who had said “do not be afraid” as an inspiration for them to do what democracy requires. Notably, the Polish prime minister showed his ignorance of when his countryman uttered that famous phrase. In a tweet, Donald Tusk claimed the pope used it to inspire Poland’s Solidarity, implying that Vance was mistaken in its use. However, John Paul actually used the phrase in his opening speech to the world when he was elected pope. Thus it has a much broader application than the historical one that the prime minister suggested. This in no way diminishes the seminal effect the Polish pope indeed had on the Solidarity movement.

Unfortunately, Tusk’s own national politics provides an illustration of the worst case of an aberrant “open society” abuse of democracy. Evidence is provided through a [report](#) published by the renowned Hudson Institute think-tank on February 17, 2025, entitled *When Democrats govern*

undemocratically: The case of Poland, which proves the center-left government led by Tusk rules in an autocratic manner. The authors Matthew Boyse and Peter Doran accuse the Polish government of “little care about the country’s common good,” together with a vendetta style of governance that intends to weaken and potentially eliminate the main opposition party. They also point out that when the latter party was in power, despite all the charges by the Brussels elite of its failing to govern by the rule-of-law, the Law and Justice party hardly ever stooped to the dearth of democratic rule characteristic of the current ruling coalition. Needless to say this form of governing is very divisive within the nation. And although on account of the war in neighboring Ukraine both governments in turn recognized the need to heavily invest in arms, a key survey in early late 2023 noted that it was the electorate of the conservative party that was the most willing to fight for the country in case of a Russian invasion. This is further proof that such a negative political stance by the current government is detrimental to the well being of the country, especially in such dangerous times.

The Solidarity movement in Poland indeed created a powerful sense of national unity in the country that that played a significant role in bringing down the communist regime. Now the current version of the spirit that strengthened the national community in its time of great need is arguably identified by the dominant European political elite with the values of the “closed society” and to no small extent has encountered the Brussels firewall on account of its allegedly nationalistic political expression. Worse still, in its place an aggressive top-down technocratic government has made its home in the country with the blessings of the Eurocrats: during the election of 2023, Boyse and Doran note that the EU “behaved very much as though its goal in Poland was regime change,” that is, preventing the conservative party’s potential victory. Thus there are those who remember the earlier high point in their national history and have an

unpleasant sense of *déjà vu* concerning the ruling class that kowtows to Brussels to such a degree. At a broader level, as Ryszard Legutko put it in an independent television interview, when the EU praises Tusk for restoring rule of law in the Poland, it confirms Vance's critique of the institution in Munich and the rule of law is thus understood in Orwellian terms, while the government negates the spirit of Solidarity in the country.

Currently there is no genuine alternative to the EU, but it does need reform to restore a healthy political community. To stop the decline of Europe the spirit of Schuman must replace that of Spinnelli in order to reinvigorate a community of nations rather than promote the imposition of an autocratic centralist union. Fostering the virtues of patriotism within the national communities can help them flourish so that they are able to contribute more at appropriate levels to the broader common good.

[Table of Contents](#)

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