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Poland's solidarity message to Europe

Poland joined the European Union in 2004 with a feeling of homecoming. For centuries, the nation had lived in a geopolitical wilderness, its independence repeatedly lost and only ephemerally regained. As Poland on Friday takes over the EU's rotating presidency, the nation has finally come into its own.

The EU presidency is less important than before the Lisbon Treaty beefed up the powers of the European Parliament and created a Council president. Many presidencies these days boil down to logistics exams for new member states. A kernel of agenda-setting power remains, however, and Warsaw is well placed to make good use of it.

No country is as alert to the realities of raw power as history has forced Poland to be. Yet in few places do the fires of political idealism burn more vividly. A sense of the past runs deep in Polish veins – which has at times been crippling: the first few years of EU membership were infused with the paranoia of the then ruling Law and Justice party. Today, however, this historical conscience allows the centre-right Civic Platform government to defend the EU's founding values with an enthusiasm long lost in core Europe.

Donald Tusk, the Polish prime minister, says in a Financial Times interview: "The most important task is to rebuild trust and faith in the idea that Europe makes sense – that the EU is truly a worthwhile invention." Mr Tusk is right. The Greek debt crisis has not been handled in a way to preserve awareness of common interests. Europe's threadbare solidarity is also visible in the backlash against the Schengen treaty and enlargement fatigue in the Balkans – both problems that Mr Tusk vows to remedy.

Not that Poland does not stand up for its national interests. Its tenacity in fighting against stricter carbon emissions cuts (Poland is largely coal-powered), or for the EU spending from which it handsomely benefits, is second to none. And Warsaw is unafraid to go its own way: unlike Berlin, it has not let the Fukushima nuclear disaster knock it off a pro-nuclear course.

The EU's sixth largest country is at long last punching its weight as a regional power. It was the bloc's only economy to grow throughout the crisis. That Poland has built better relations with Germany and Russia than at any time in history makes the country pivotal for EU policy towards Moscow. But Poland shows that national assertiveness is compatible with European unity.

Solidarity was the clarion call of Poles' anti-communist struggle. If anyone can revive a sense of common European purpose, it is they.

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