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**Wystąpienie Ministra Spraw Zagranicznych RP Radosława Sikorskiego
na konferencji *European Council on Foreign Relations***

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Distinguished Guests,

Although the times are grim, let me start with a short anecdote. Some of you may know it, but it captures well the position I believe we – the citizens of the European Union and Europeans more broadly – are in.

A storm descends on a small town and heavy rain quickly turns into a flood. The waters rise, but the local priest, instead of leaving his parish, kneels in prayer in front of the church. As his fellow townspeople evacuate, they urge him to join them, offering a seat in a car.

The priest refuses. "I have faith in the Lord. I will be saved", he says.

The waters keep on rising. The priest needs to abandon the main church hall and climb to the first floor. Yet he refuses another rescue offer – this time by firemen in a motor boat who warn him about the dam which is about to break.

"I have nothing to fear. The Lord is with me", replies the priest.

Soon after the whole town disappears under the water. Only the top of the church's bell tower remains above the surface. Our priest – perched on its roof – is once more offered help, this time by rescuers in a helicopter hovering above.

For the third time he refuses, insisting the Lord will spare him.

Unsurprisingly, he soon drowns but given his piety his soul ends up in heaven. Faced with God he asks why he was allowed to die despite his unwavering faith.

"I sent you a car, a boat and a helicopter" – God replies – "What else did you expect me to do?"

Whether you believe in the Almighty or not, there is no shortage of signs suggesting the global order built after the last great war is now on a shaky ground. Wherever we look, we see it heavily stress-tested – in Ukraine, in the Middle East, in Sudan, in the South China Sea. But not only there. Borders are being challenged in the Western Hemisphere as well. And here in Europe the number of those who wish to see the world burn has also been on the rise.

What they would like to replace the current order with is unclear at best. These diverse forces are united by their desire for change. They deeply – and often honestly – feel that the world as it is can no longer be.

Little wonder, then, that our Presidency of the Council of the EU chose "Security, Europe!" as its guiding motto. Rightly so – as we see almost every day.

What is to be done?

With the waters around us growing there are three major options on the menu.

First, following the example of the aforementioned priest, we can fall to our knees, cover our eyes and hope for some divine force – or a powerful ally – to spare us from whatever threats the future holds.

Secondly, we might revert to the old ways, splitting into separate camps and acting individually in what we believe to be in our particular, national interests. I don't recommend it. We have seen this movie many times before and we know how it ends.

Thirdly, we might chose a hard way and despite all our differences band together as a Union in order to protect what we have achieved since the end of World War II. Given the magnitude of the challenge I honestly see no better way. Either we, as Europeans, face the headwinds united, or we condemn ourselves to irrelevance.

Distinguished Guests,

We are being openly told that our main ally, the United States, cannot devote most of its time and resources to dealing with European issues because it has – as secretary of state Marco Rubio said – “other priorities to focus on¹”.

I agree. The only truly global superpower has global responsibilities. And the number of flashpoints, which might demand Washington’s attention seems only to be growing. As is the power of adversary forces.

As a result, according to the official Pentagon planning doctrine, the United States can no longer fight more than one major war at a time.

Washington communicates its position plainly. “We’re here today to directly and unambiguously express that stark strategic realities prevent the United States of America from being primarily focused on the security of Europe”, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth announced in Brussels back in February².

Vice President JD Vance said “that Europe’s entire security infrastructure [...] has been subsidized by the United States of America” and added that it’s neither in Europe’s, nor America’s interest, “for Europe to be a permanent security vassal of the United States”³.

¹ <https://www.state.gov/secretary-of-state-marco-rubio-remarks-to-press-3/>

² <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4064113/opening-remarks-by-secretary-of-defense-pete-hegseth-at-ukraine-defense-contact/>

³ <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/04/18/europe/us-europe-changing-relationship-analysis-intl>

President Trump himself has repeatedly accused Europe for “freeloading” and “taking advantage” of his country.

Many Europeans – myself included – do not like what we hear. But we must not pretend we can’t hear it.

With all my heart I hope that strong transatlantic ties will remain the backbone of mutual prosperity and security. Hoping for the best, however, simply won’t do. It must go hand in hand with preparing for what diplomats would call “suboptimal scenarios”. We should do both: hope and prepare. Trust but verify.

With the war raging just a few hundreds of kilometers from EU’s borders, and hybrid attacks occurring in virtually all European countries on a regular basis, including Poland, what other choice do we have?

It takes at least two parties to create an alliance and only one to start a war. We may not want the transatlantic coalition to erode, but it will unless both sides want to keep it going. We may not want to be on a crisis footing with Russia, but we will be, unless Putin is forced to decide otherwise.

Security and resilience are essential – but they come at a cost. A cost that is not only financial, but also deeply tied to our collective psyche. There is a book written by one of the most influential Western thinkers of the postwar era, which challenges the spiritual exhaustion, political complacency, and strategic vulnerability that the author feared could erode Europe from within. Raymond Aron’s “In Defense of Decadent Europe” sends a warning: “Europe is mortal.” To remain alive it must confront and overcome its weaknesses.

Yes, Europe can fall - as it did in the past - to bombs but also to malaise and neglect, which are an open invitation to our adversaries. Preparedness is not just precaution – it is our best deterrent to keep peril at bay.

Here in Poland we’ve long been guided by the wise ancient proverb – *si vis pacem, para bellum*. Others have followed. Since 2016, all NATO member states excluding

the US, have boosted their defense spending by 98 percent, from 255 to 506 billion dollars. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this trend has only picked up.

Security doesn't simply mean more soldiers and more military equipment, although these are also desperately needed. Security means social cohesion, stable, cooperative economies, and the capability to protect our citizens by deterring those who wish us harm. Security also means: no grey zones – no member and neighbour left vulnerable, or threatened by other countries' appetite for more land.

Europe must stand firmly in defense of Kyiv's right to self-determination. Not out of charity, but because it is the right thing to do, which also happens to be in our long-term, strategic interest.

We need to maintain our solidarity with the victim by helping it withstand Russian attacks and later rebuild what has been destroyed.

We all as Europeans have already done a lot. Since 2022, the EU has committed nearly 148 billion euros in support of Ukraine. This includes almost 77 billion euros from the Team Europe instrument, as well as 50 billion euros in military aid, and more than 3.5 billion euros generated from Russia's frozen assets.

These are not just numbers—they are a testament to Europe's solidarity and sense of duty. If a few years ago somebody claimed

- that the EU would soon be spending billions to militarily support a country which is not even its member;
- that Germany, disregarding its fiscal restrictions, would commit hundreds of billions to kickstart its military industry;
- that hundreds of billions would flow from Brussels to finance military projects;

this person would be deemed delusional, or at best naïve. We have done a lot – but we are still far away from the finish line.

The result of Putin's aggression will define our region's security for years and decades to come. In order for Europe to succeed, however, we must better define what success means. And offer our citizens more than the promise of keeping the *status quo*.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

"Our times suffer from too little utopian thinking", I read recently in a book by two liberal American authors⁴. The need for a vision of a brighter future is by no means limited to the progressives. Elon Musk's pledges of cheap space travel and colonization of other planets appeal to people across the political spectrum. For better or worse humans are a restless species, who cannot be satisfied with promises of more of the same.

Grand visions of the perfect future often lead to grand tragedies, but they are also a fuel that drives us to action. That is why we tend to come back to them – the more often the more desperate the circumstances.

For example, in 1831, a young Polish artilleryman⁵ Wojciech Jastrzębowski – moved by the experience of a brutally suppressed national uprising against the Tsarist Russia – spend his time between battles dreaming of a united continent. He wrote that dream down in a bold project published as "*The Constitution for Europe*". Behind the day to day violence, he sensed something deeper than war – a civilizational clash, not merely between two armies, but between Europe – the land of the free-minded, and Russia – a regime founded on the opposition to individual liberties.

⁴ Ezra Klein, Derek Thompson, *Abundance*, Avid Reader Press / Simon & Schuster, 2025.

⁵ Wojciech Bogumił Jastrzębowski

<https://senat.edu.pl/assets/Edukacja/EdukacjaEuropejska/Wystawa-Konstytucja-dla-Europy.pdf>

Jastrzebowski's proposal of European unity bears striking resemblance to many founding ideals and institutions of the EU: common defense, dissolution of internal borders, the supremacy of European norms over national laws, and even a ban on the death penalty. Almost 200 years ago, when the Constitution was first written, such a vision of a pan-European cooperation seemed utterly utopian. And yet tragic experiences of the following decades had gradually brought us Europeans closer together.

At first, the motivations behind the European project were mainly negative – to avoid the mistakes of the past. In the May 1950 Schuman Declaration, the French foreign minister famously said: "A united Europe was not achieved and we had war."⁶

75 years later these memories have naturally faded, even as the war rages on in our neighborhood.

That is why a new idea of Europe's future cannot be limited to what it wants to avoid, but should speak clearly about what it wants to build. Poland's vision – which I presented before our parliament in my annual statement – boils down to three themes: a "geopolitical union," a "union of growth" and a "union of values,"

A strong **geopolitical union**, taking advantage of its economic, military and political potential to pursue an active foreign policy, is indispensable to securing our interests. It is a union of states which recognize unprecedented threats to our continent, and are willing to dedicate equally unprecedented funds and powers to make up for years of negligence. They should also be willing to grant the EU institutions the same respect they demand for it from external actors. We can't expect Washington, Beijing, Moscow or New Delhi to hold the EU institutions in high esteem, if we ourselves undermine their legitimacy.

⁶ https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/history-eu/1945-59/schuman-declaration-may-1950_en

A **union of growth** and competitiveness allows the member states to benefit more from the greatest asset that we have – a vast and rich common market. We should give priority to reducing costs of energy and bureaucratic burdens, and to supporting innovation— both technological and social. These changes are essential for the European Union to stand its ground against non-European competitors.

A **union of values** is an association of states where human rights, democratic principles, and the rule of law cement and shape our common identity as Europeans.

We are well aware that there is not one political system suitable for every state around the globe. But we must never lose sight of the norms underpinning our political community. Respect of other nations' right to exist and of internationally recognized borders are certainly among them.

The European Union cannot and should not go back to being just a free trade area. Given the challenges we are facing, a consolidated effort to build strong political and defense capabilities is no longer an option. I believe it is a must.

Securing the future of Europe requires a radical change in defense policies but also breaking the barriers towards greater economic integration. Respect and standing in the global race are never given and never constant. Great powers of the past did not ascend to their positions by giving away candy but by acting boldly and strategically.

This is the European Union that I'd like to see built stronger, more prosperous and more secure — not a gift from history, but a hard-won result of our unity, our labor, and our solidarity – a word we hold sacred in this country.

Either we find in ourselves what it takes, or we'll become mere bystanders to the world affairs. It is almost too late to act.