

***Speech delivered by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs
Radosław Sikorski at “The Capable State. How to Effectively Implement
Strategic Investments for Poland’s Development” conference.***

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“STRATEGY FOR THE TIME OF COLLAPSE”

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me to today’s conference and for addressing a subject of pivotal importance—for such is the ability to think strategically about the country’s development.

Let me begin with a question. Why are Western Europeans not afraid of Russian tanks raiding their territory? Because they know that the Border Guard would stop them for violating the EU’s emission standards.

This anecdote is not about entertainment but illustrating two grave cognitive errors.

Firstly, the belief that bureaucratic procedures are inviolable and omnipotent.

Secondly, that everyone follows the same patterns of reasoning as Europeans.

This is not, obviously, about using bureaucracy as a punching bag, but about something much more serious. It is about the ability to think and act in circumstances not covered by established procedures: at a time when the old international order is waning, but the new one has not yet been

born; when the rules of peacetime do not apply, but we are not yet at war; when today's ally can become tomorrow's strong rival.

The pursuit of the long-term national interest depends to a large extent on what we call strategic culture.

It is one of state's key assets. It is shaped by cultural habits, social capital, the education system, and political life.

We are shaping it as well during today's conference. Strategic culture is, as Professor Roman Kuźniar put it, "glasses through which we view the world and assess the processes and events taking place within it."

If strategic culture is an instrument through which we interpret reality, then a capable state must invest in this tool—develop and upgrade it.

A state which does not do so can be compared to a captain who sets the course for his ship at a rough guess, whilst others use satellite geolocation.

Dear Guests,

For every public official, whatever their position in the hierarchy, one of the greatest challenges is the fear of making a mistake. The fear of the consequences can be paralysing. It is perfectly understandable from the psychological perspective.

However, please be warned against a binary approach to the problem: will I make a mistake, or will I manage to avoid it? A true alternative to a mistake is a gain that might never materialise if elimination of risk becomes the ultimate goal.

Readiness to think outside the box is a prerequisite for development, particularly in a rapidly changing environment.

In Poland, we can still take risks in a relatively peaceful environment. Ukraine, however, cannot afford it: the level of risk is many times greater, the stakes are incomparably higher, and the time pressure is unimaginable—after all, the survival of the state and thousands of lives are at stake.

Should military equipment be deployed, even if there is no time for extensive testing?

Should a start-up be supported that has a good idea but is only just entering the market?

Should public funds be invested in an innovative company, giving it freedom to operate, or should it be meticulously scrutinised?

Ukraine's officials face such decisions on a daily basis.

A comparison of risk tolerance between European and American entrepreneurs also works to our disadvantage. That is mostly why Europe is struggling so hard to catch up with the US semiconductor and artificial intelligence sectors.

Last summer, I visited California. When I asked Polish entrepreneurs in San Francisco why they work there and not in Poland, they gave two related reasons: easier access to capital and fewer restrictions on its use. This is precisely because of a greater tolerance to the possibility of a failure.

We are all too often terrified by the prospect of failure. We have not learned yet that a failure is not always a disaster. It is a lesson, which increases the chance of success at the next attempt.

Sometimes I get the impression that both in Poland and in Europe the saying “nothing ventured, nothing gained” has not really caught on. We prefer to say that “peace of mind is worth more than money”.

But today there is more at stake than comfort in everyday life. We are operating under the pressure of a growing threat. The inability to make decisions is, in fact, also a decision. And it has its consequences.

That is not only true for the functioning of a state, but also for the economy. Also in this area, instead of managing risk proactively, we get caught up in extremes.

On the one hand, there is a strong temptation of versatility: there are some who would like to have a finger in every pie. Give everything the same amount of attention. Invest, even a little, in every economic sector. This also due to fear.

The fear of misplacing priorities leads to a situation where, instead of excelling in a few areas, we are average in many.

After all, if world powers establish a hierarchy of their strategic goals and of means necessary to achieve them, this is all the more reason why the medium-sized countries must know how to choose: what we must develop, and what would simply be useful.

There is a second pitfall, too. It is focusing on what we made our priority so much that we lose sight of the changing circumstances.

Too much selectivity can trap us in a very narrow rut. It is settling for the role of a journeyman who is the world's best at hammering the heels onto soles, who would not even think that they could build a shoe factory.

The state is not an enterprise that can focus on one product only. The trick is to strike a balance: to identify strategic investments while ensuring the vitality and resilience of the whole economy.

And so we are doomed to swinging between extremes, observing our surroundings, assessing the impact of our actions, perhaps making mistakes, and, certainly, making corrections.

What is more, in today's world we have to do it under time pressure, probably faster than we would like to, and definitely faster than our rivals.

An uncertain international situation forces us to act differently than in times of peace. It imposes certain priorities on us. Undoubtedly, the most important one is security.

Its pillar is raising one's defence capabilities. However, I would like to caution you against looking at security only through the military lens. The defence industry, the professionalisation of the army, and expanding its size are extremely important, but security is more than just that.

Let me give you but a few examples.

Raw materials security. In the 21st century, a state that wants to stay sovereign and develop a modern economy must secure access to resources which are not available in its territory.

Nowadays, the control over economic assets in the broad sense gets exploited—they become a means of blackmail by countries which enjoy a privileged access to them.

This is true not only for raw materials and technology, but also for means of transport and critical points along the most important trade routes.

And so, disrupted supply chains are becoming an increasingly greater challenge.

Disruption in the export of semiconductors or other advanced electronic components may be due to deliberate actions. It may also be the result of force majeure, which we experienced during the coronavirus pandemic.

These are not black swan events. These are events which have already happened and may happen again.

Another challenge: energy security.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the war in the Persian Gulf and the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, and a tense situation in the Red Sea are factors undermining the energy security of the whole Europe.

Unfortunately, the prices of energy in Poland, being in part a heritage of a non-sovereign economic policy during the communist era, are among the highest in the European Union.

That is why our strategic investments must involve a shift toward nuclear and renewable energy. This is not a political whim, but an economic necessity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The awareness of one's own resources and limitations—material, technological, and human—is part of strategic culture and planning.

It is unlikely that we will build a nuclear-powered ship.

It is unlikely that we will send the first manned mission to Mars.

We will not invest trillions of dollars into the development of artificial intelligence.

But we have a lot to offer in several strategic niches.

We are already present in the development of European satellite imaging systems—for civilian and military purposes.

We are an emerging key player in the production of advanced air defence systems. The SAN programme proves that Poland can not only procure defensive technologies but also pioneer solutions that chart the course for the European anti-drone defence.

Polish companies are entering the market of designing advanced microprocessors.

There is still room for improvement in terms of cooperation between state institutions and domestic private businesses as well as combining capital and technological potential between Polish and foreign entities. The same applies to the armaments sector and dual-use goods.

There are two reasons why we should better harness the potential of private businesses: firstly, the ability to pay for strategic projects from the state budget is limited, even with EU support, and secondly, Ukraine sets an example by using dispersed private production to maintain a high level of innovation and continuous deliveries in spite of aggressor's attacks. This is particularly important for the production of armaments.

Unfortunately, the doctrine of absolute separation of the state and the private sector continues to prevail, to the detriment of today's Poland and Europe.

In 2005–2024, Chinese companies received three to eight times as much government support as businesses from OECD countries. We cannot pretend we do not know that.

The state cannot replace the market, but it can be more active in supporting our producers. There are non-controversial but effective things that can be done, such as securing loans or supporting demand and exports.

We have our strengths. The scale of funds Europe has earmarked for security opens up a new horizon for Poland that expands way beyond the defence industry. We can boost our production capacity as well as move up in European and global value chains.

In 2023, Bloomberg listed Poland among the five key “connectors” benefitting from the reshuffling of global supply chains in response to growing US–China tensions.

The European Union recognises the need to enhance Europe's innovative capacity in the face of increasing global rivalry, hence the stunning EUR 451 billion to be spent on competitiveness and research under the next multiannual financial framework.

In consequence, our universities need to aim higher, too. Improving their quality, including through much closer cooperation or consolidation, is a key to tapping into the enormous opportunity offered to them with these funds.

If we do not want to miss that chance, not only must we spend money on consuming ready-made solutions but also on designing ours. This is not always obvious and easily done, though.

In 2025, we spent less than one percent of our total defence expenditure on defence research and development. The figure has seen a downtrend for the past decade or so. We can afford to aim higher.

Last but not least, let me address the KSAP students and graduates:

You either will be or already are taking part in working out decisions of strategic importance for the country.

What should the State expect from you? Let me quote: “The public officials should approach all matters with utmost gravity, [...] prioritising reassurance of the Party’s authority [...]. The strongest expression of their loyalty to the Party lies in pursuing its line, policies, and decisions to the letter.”

That is how Kim Jong Un addressed the officials in North Korea. The solution for you is simple: do the exact opposite.

That correct hierarchy of values was already laid down with clarity in the National Civil Service Act of 1922, the first in its category after Poland had regained independence:

The Act stated that “the public official shall serve the Republic of Poland faithfully [...] and attend to public affairs to the best of their will and knowledge.”

Today, Poland needs people who have the courage to think and are not afraid of assuming responsibility, taking risk, and working under the pressure of time and history.

People capable of responding to change. People ready to build a strategic culture, plan steps to be taken by the state, and adjust them when new circumstances so require.

That is the career I wish for you in your service for the Republic of Poland.
Thank you!