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Poland in 2050: Conditions for Further Development

Over the last 35 years, Poland has achieved extraordinary economic success. Its GDP per capita rose from 29 percent to over 70 percent of the German level. Over the course of three and a half decades, we managed to close most of the gap with our western neighbor that had widened for centuries (Orłowski, 2015). We managed to fully exploit the competitive advantage of a relatively cheap but well-qualified labor force. However, in the coming decades our country's development model must change.

The World in 2050: Changes Impossible to Predict

The most powerful driver of change in the global economy will be technological development. We live in an era of unprecedented progress, which can completely change the rules of the global economic game in a short time. We have become accustomed to the axiom that a country with lower wages has a competitive advantage over a country with higher wages. However, robotization and digitization can quickly change this (Acemoglu, Restrepo, 2020). A robot-operated factory in Japan may already have an advantage over a human-operated factory in Vietnam, and an AI-supported customer service system in the United States over a call center in India.

Security also remains a great unknown. In addition to the classic threats of a political and military nature, which have proved to be far more real than they seemed a decade ago, countries must also be prepared for cyberattacks, terrorism, economic and technological blackmail, and attempts to destabilize their political and social systems. In a rapidly and unpredictably changing environment, the ability to adapt and take advantage of emerging opportunities will be crucial to development.

People

The first and most important condition for a highly adaptable economy is people's ability to absorb and accept change. Among the features of human capital important for Poland's development, the following are particularly important: the ability to continuously learn, absorb technology, and adapt to changes taking place in the market (this is much more than the slogan "education for the needs of the labor market"); finding and verifying information (sifting out important and accurate information from noise); analytical skills and the ability to draw synthetic conclusions; communication and cooperation with other people; and finally, the virtue of leadership (a prerequisite for forming a group of social and economic leaders who share the ambition to modernize and develop the country).

From the perspective of these needs, I consider the current level of development of Poland's human capital to be insufficient (Orłowski, 2025). Polish education is preoccupied with pseudo-reforms (woefully incompatible with actual needs), quarrels over teachers' salaries, and the fight for electoral votes. It neither fosters attitudes of initiative, leadership, entrepreneurship, and cooperation nor provides tools for flexible adaptation in a changing world. It does not teach people how to verify and analyze information, which makes them susceptible to financial fraud and crude populism. This applies to education at every level: from kindergartens and schools to universities (which should develop a cadre of leaders). Polish education needs fundamental reforms.

Other aspects of human capital development include demographic and migration trends. The decline in fertility among women that has occurred over the past decades has been largely a cultural phenomenon (Wróblewski et al., 2021). A wise pro-family policy, aimed at helping people reconcile work with having children (rather than simply handing out benefits), may improve the situation somewhat. However, this does not change the fact that it is also necessary to develop an immigration strategy that will ensure effective control over migration processes, facilitate the integration of immigrants into Polish society, and increase understanding and acceptance of multiculturalism in the country itself.

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Capital

Poland's development and modernization—and especially the much-needed technological leap—require capital. While heavy reliance on foreign capital is conceivable, it carries risks. First, under such a model, a growing portion of GDP is transferred abroad in the form of repatriated profits; second, foreign capital invested in Poland tends to focus more on exploiting existing competitive advantages (cheaper labor, access to the EU market) than on innovation. Although Poland should strive to attract technologically advanced foreign investment, if it is to catch up with the leaders, strong, expansive domestic companies are essential. This requires Polish private capital. And Polish capital can only come from increased domestic savings.

Unfortunately, this is a problem: the growing consumer aspirations of society will likely lead to a decline in the net saving rate (Ackert et al., 2024). This situation can only be changed through consistent efforts to increase savings, combined with policies that curb the tendency toward excessive debt accumulation. Obviously, such actions will be rather unpopular.

The State

Another difficult problem is the role of public institutions. They face enormous tasks in ensuring adequate education and infrastructure and in reconciling growth with environmental protection. Through appropriate policies, they must also create the right conditions for economic stability and increased savings (adopting the euro, currently unimaginable, could help), technological progress, and the expansion of private companies. The efficiency of public institutions must increase radically—smaller, more efficient institutions are needed, equipped with the necessary technologies, and capable of strategic planning in a rapidly changing world. The development of such institutions is hampered by the growing impoverishment of Polish politics, with politicians ready to trade long-term plans for short-term vote-buying. The Polish state is unable to engage in dialogue with business (in the spirit of the new industrial policy) (Juhász et al., 2024), and the only idea for supporting technological progress in enterprises is to distribute subsidies (often wasted). Meanwhile, the solution to the problem lies elsewhere: given rising labor costs, properly educated and ambitious entrepreneurs must understand that technological leaps are the only way forward. But this, of course, requires creating the right conditions for business development and investment—and the lowest investment rate in 30 years is a symbol of the state's current ineffectiveness in this area. Polish academic institutions also require reforms, as they must finally face economic pressure to cooperate with business.

Security

Finally, there is another area in which no one can replace the state. Development requires security—both technological and economic, as well as military, political, and social. Without going into details, which economists prefer to leave to political scientists, I have no doubt that the only effective course of action is to anchor Poland as firmly as possible in the structures of a more integrated Europe.

> Since there is no country in Europe whose history has more painfully demonstrated that security cannot be ensured in isolation, Poland should be among the countries most interested in further integration.

Ambition and Flexibility

Two key conditions are necessary for Poland's successful development by 2050. First, Poles—politicians, entrepreneurs, scientists, and ordinary people—should be proud of what they have already accomplished, confident that they can catch up with the best, and determined to do so.

> Education should play a key role here, although I would not underestimate the role of media narratives and even skillful state propaganda. Second, Poles, the Polish state, and the Polish economy must acquire the ability to adapt effectively to change and leverage it for development.

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