

**Minister Radosław Sikorski's address at the Conference of the
Heads of Missions of Estonia.**

Modernizing Foreign Service

Tallinn, 27 August 2012

A horse never runs so fast as when he has other horses to catch up and outpace, said Ovid.

The statement by a Roman poet fits perfectly the situation of Poland, Estonia and the rest of the CEE region.

We all have been running very fast indeed to make up for the time lost. Paradoxically, the position of chasing the leader gives us a certain psychological advantage.

But our goal is not only to catch up with the rest in the race, but confront the rapidly transforming global reality.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The foreign service area has a particularly high potential for constant modification.

Diplomats are at the forefront of adapting to the fluctuations in political, social, and economic relations. Their ability to identify new goals and translate them into actions is the ultimate proof of a foreign service's success.

This is why the spirit of innovation, which Estonia understands so well, is key for the Polish MFA.

Digitalization and informatization are the most conspicuous aspects of this. To make MFA staff more mobile we have equipped over two thousand people with smartphone terminals and 1800 people with secure notebooks.

So simple, but how crucial. With information travelling almost at the speed of light nowadays, such innovation and modernization are no longer optional. Unless, of course, we don't mind being beaten in instant information delivery by Reuters.

I recall, for example, the Palestinian bid for membership at UNESCO. Within less than half an hour of voting being concluded, there was already a Reuters article with the exact information on how votes were distributed, who abstained, who voted in favour. I was happy that I knew all this before the news went online. Thanks to the devices we've equipped our diplomats with I was able to follow the negotiations regarding the EU's position.

Another facet where new technologies often give us an advantage are negotiations. The ability to instantly consult the Capital does make a difference. A tiny modification of instructions based on the information from the HQ may make or break a deal. You've all been there and you know exactly what I'm talking about.

Often, at the European Council, at COREPER or even working groups' meetings, when tough negotiations continue long into the night, it is the technical devices that help us provide indispensable information in order to get an upper hand or exchange bargaining chips. Only when you have a full picture, can you take right decisions.

But electronic gadgets are no guarantee of a proper knowledge flow. No mere big boys' toys, this technical development must be coupled with the organizational changes.

As a worldwide institution employing almost five thousand people, with over 120 diplomatic missions around the globe we need to absorb an old German saying: "If Siemens only knew what Siemens knows."

The choice is simple: either we coordinate our activities and exploit our potential to the full, or we get bogged down in the bureaucratic maze.

The Polish MFA's key priority is boosting our effectiveness. To achieve it, we are executing business process improvement initiative. This is not a lecture in business performance at INSEAD, so let's talk results, what it means in practice. A combination of a large scale organizational project and implementation of innovative IT workflow solutions is transforming our operations.

Being snowed under a ton of paper has become a thing of the past. Not only did it damage forests, but was also simply inefficient. Thanks to electronic workflow, we are more effective. We save time and people become more accountable. It allows for a speedy distribution of documents and delegation of tasks.

Sharepoint is another novelty we introduced. Its value cannot be emphasized enough. A database with document blueprints, solutions, especially pertaining to certain consular cases that happen rarely, saves time and resources that can be dedicated to other assignments. Sharing information between the capital and the missions abroad is absolutely vital. Otherwise, our relevance remains a big question mark.

We have undergone internal restructuring this year and a separate Modernization Section was set up within the Ministry. Its goal is to modernize the internal information flow and knowledge management to enhance the organizational culture, infrastructure and human resources management.

We also set up Operations Centre, which among other tasks tracks all sorts of media to keep an eye on the situation around the world 24/7. Additionally, it is complemented by the Satellite Imagery Section, which provides analytical information based on satellite images from crisis areas.

It proved to be an invaluable contact point during the Arab Spring, or the Fukushima disaster – to name but just two examples.

While the times are turbulent and the economic crisis rages on, our MFA carries on with its infrastructure undertakings.

Last year, we allocated over EUR 68 million to investments, with over EUR 83 million earmarked for 2012 - most of which to be spent on smart building technologies.

Last year, our flagship projects included the construction and furnishing of a state-of-the-art building for our Permanent Representation to the EU in Brussels – one of the city’s most modern edifices, the new Consulate General in Lviv, as well as the purchase and modernization of a new residence for Poland’s Ambassador in Washington.

While we had to adjust the number of diplomatic missions worldwide, we’ve managed to use the existing resources more efficiently. In fact, in 2011 we increased our consular activity by a quarter as compared to the year before, and this despite staff reduction.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

To adjust to the new rules of the global diplomatic game – and lay down our own - we need to keep our skill-set updated.

Our MFA is carrying out analytical work with the view to creating a new diplomatic service system that would guarantee better opportunities for professional development and improve diplomats’ mobility.

In skills development we put special emphasis on broadening economic knowledge. Our target is also to improve soft skills, including the ability to negotiate and select information.

In modernizing the foreign service we don’t lose sight of a key goal: to move closer to the citizen, chiefly through the consular service.

Digital times call for digital solutions. So, we launched an e-consulate. To spare our citizens the inconvenience of queues, they can now register online and choose an appointment to come to the consulate at a specific time. Visa requests must be registered in e-consulate as well. Thanks to such outsourcing, we have alleviated heavy workload of our diplomats, who only have to verify the information instead of also typing it into the system. Needless to say, they can now process more requests.

A great new feature of the e-consulate, which I hope will be used more widely, is the possibility of registering individual travels abroad. This gives us important information on the number of Polish citizens in crisis areas and enables us to provide more effective assistance.

We have also published two online guides for Poles abroad. They are among most visited sections on the Ministry's website and have been made available for iPhone and iPad users via iPolak application. The application saw 16,000 downloads in the first three months since its launch.

We have established a Call Center to provide information and assistance in emergencies. It turned out very useful during the Arab Spring, EURO 2012, etc.

We've set up a Consular Support Team, as part of the emergency response system. This group of experienced diplomats is ready to provide immediate assistance to our diplomatic missions around the globe within 24 hours. These rapid deployment teams have already been put to the test. They have been effectively deployed in Egypt in 2011 issuing temporary passports to Polish citizens in order to allow for their speedy evacuation.

MFA has launched mobile consular offices covering 45 locations worldwide, which have served over 11,000 Poles so far. They deal with passport and visa issues, carry out document certification and take care of other consular activities. Further 14 locations will soon be added to the list.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Henry Ford once said “Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success.”

Cooperation spurs the exchange of best practices - a true boost for modernization and the key to our common success. This is why we joined the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in November and are finishing accession negotiations to the European Space Agency.

Thanks to the Polish presidency of the EU Council or the current presidency of the V4 Group, Polish diplomacy has a wealth of new experiences to share with others, not to speak of its highly professional staff.

We believe that a modern foreign policy should have a strong neighbourhood and regional dimension. A natural area for Poland and Estonia alike is the Baltic Sea region. The potential of the region is impressive with 1/3 of the EU population - including Germany and Poland - generating about a third of the EU GDP and trade.

The Visegrad Group, Weimar Triangle, or the Eastern Partnership are other promising regional cooperation structures for Poland – besides the obvious ones: the EU and NATO.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The CEE horses have been running very fast. But how to catch up - and outpace – the others?

There is no need to be a giant. No need for innumerable staff and exorbitant overhead expenses to have a well functioning structure. What is important is highly skilled and savvy personnel. Flexibility and agility are a lot more in demand than sheer size. After all, we live in the knowledge-based world. And wasn't it David who won an uneven duel against Goliath? Estonia, and Poland, have a thing or two to teach to the rest of Europe.