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### Poland in the OECD: the way forward

Jakub Wiśniewski<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> GLOBSEC Policy Institute in Bratislava,  
Former Ambassador, Permanent Representative of Poland to the OECD

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Jakub Wiśniewski

## Poland in the OECD: the way forward

The great Plato said the unexamined life is not worth living. Who does the examinations, country studies, fact-finding activities better than the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)? Poland became a member in 1996 and ever since it has relied on this organization for data and analysis. The twentieth anniversary of Poland's joining the OECD is a perfect opportunity to reflect on what needs to be improved. Nobody can deny the enormous effort that was put into the OECD accession or everyday duty of many bureaucrats, academics and politicians who sought to make good use of Polish membership in the OECD to adopt better policies for better quality of life in Poland. The purpose of my intervention is to make a case that to rest on our laurels, given the challenging circumstances that define the global context today, is the least sensible thing to do.

### **The evolving global context and the four challenges ahead**

First and foremost, the global economy has entered a phase of vulnerability and unpredictability making a new crisis increasingly probable. The governments should make the most of their OECD membership and the OECD's expertise to be prepared for any turbulence in trade, investments and financial flows. The second challenge has to do with the particular situation in Poland. Poland has developed well over the

last 25 years but that was the easy part of the story. The low hanging fruit of competitiveness based on low cost of labour has already been picked. Now is the time to find new sources of sustainable growth. To this end many hints have been provided by the OECD. The third challenge is geopolitical, i.e. increasingly, evidence suggests, Western countries' clout in the world affairs is decreasing fast, given Asia's economic and demographic rise and the West's demographic decline. To make a long story short, it may be the last moment for Poland to participate in the work of the OECD as we know it. What follows is that in a decade or so – and it may turn out to be the challenge number four – the OECD may be transformed into something new, possibly a looser platform of cooperation including the OECD members and other global players like China or India. Whatever happens, one should not expect business as usual in 20 years' time, i.e. when Poland will be celebrating the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its accession to the OECD. As the saying goes, make hay while the sun shines...

### **The EU, the OECD and their waning voices in the global debate**

The OECD is one of the few global organizations that have remained essentially Western by design, i.e. based on liberal democratic order established after World War II, and by membership, i.e. bringing together a great number of European countries. Rich countries constitute the majority of the OECD members. It is easier to utilize the OECD's expertise when a country is prosperous, politically consistent and predictable. When a country is well developed and its administration is efficient and henceforth that country's business community is more prone to engage with dialogue with the authorities, and there is commitment to adopt ambitious public policies. Poland, along with other countries from Central Europe or Turkey, has still a lot to do in this respect. It also helps when an OECD member is part of the G7 or G20 or has some specific global agenda, for instance Sweden on development policy or Switzerland on financial sector. Poland has hitherto rarely been a leader or stakeholder in global policy debates outside the smaller forum of the EU. By the way, with each passing year the voice of Europe is weaker in the world economic debate, and this trend is reinforced by the crisis of European integration.

## **Know thyself said the inscription in the Temple of Apollo at Delphi**

It does not help that there is no clear chain of command as regards the OECD in the Polish public administration. The permanent delegation is run by the ambassador nominated and supervised by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, whereas the ownership of the portfolio rests predominantly with the Minister of Development. The delegation is hardly a single team with separate budgets and chains of command of the Ministry of Development and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Hundreds of Polish officials from line ministries are in the works of the OECD but there is little dialogue among them. The logic of Polish positions presented at the OECD Council represents largely micro management and defensive protection of Polish policies. By contrast, many OECD members treat the organization as a genuine evaluation tool and a mirror where they can spot and improve the weaknesses of their public policies. Those OECD members resist the temptation of preaching about the virtues of their national socio-economic models and instead listen to learn from and follow good examples. Again, it is not to deny the genuine enthusiasm of many people responsible for the OECD in the Polish administration. The flaws are systemic and structural.

## **The OECD and the EU: competing memberships?**

To some extent, the accession of Poland to the European Union in 2004 overshadowed Poland's membership in the OECD. Accession to the EU represented a huge challenge for the Polish administration. It required a daily routine of participation in the EU's work to be built and sustained. As such, it influenced almost all areas of economic and social life in Poland throughout the 1990s and onwards. Structural funds and cohesion policy served as important incentives to maintain that administrative effort in that they translated into massive transfers to be invested in the Polish infrastructure. The EU legislation loomed large, as something that Polish politicians and bureaucrats could almost touch and feel; as something they had to face, react to, prevent, influence, and build coalitions around. The media spotlight was constantly on Brussels as well. From this perspective, the OECD looked less important for many overworked officials, academics or citizens.

## Looking ahead

Drawing on the practical insight that I have had the opportunity to gain while serving as the Ambassador of Poland at the OECD, in the context of the debate on the OECD, global governance and Poland's membership in the OECD, in my view, five recommendations are particularly relevant today. First, upgrade the OECD as a subject in the remit of the Ministry of Development. This would mean putting more resources and people focused on the subject. In other words, make the OECD a subject of political and strategic reflection. Second, identify the key two, three priorities of Poland's OECD membership policy; lest we become Jack of all trades and master of none. Those priorities could be turned into levers of more active Polish engagement simultaneously in the world socio-economic affairs and the OECD's agenda. Third, it is also essential that the three key ministries involved in the process of shaping Poland's stance towards/in the OECD, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Development and Ministry of Finance, talk to each other more, especially at the political level. Fourth, use the OECD expertise more, especially when Polish officials need to arm themselves with arguments before entering negotiations over climate change policies or simply daily routine issues in the EU. Facts and figures the OECD provides could serve as a useful tool to promote specifically the Polish agenda. Fifth, Poland is not a key global player. This means that Poland's chances to set the tone of discussion held at the international level over topics such as migrations or rural policies are limited. It is all the more important to listen to what the key players have to say and adapt to the current trends and narrative. Only in this way Poland will be able to improve its chances to be more effective in attaining its political and strategic objectives, e.g. 'green growth' is part of the public debate and it is better to promote Polish green growth policies instead of rejecting the whole concept.

Dear Reader, please, bear in mind, while reading this intervention that this is what former ambassadors are for, i.e. to add a grain of salt and provide food for thought. The ultimate goal is, however, the same for all of us, better policies for better quality of living in Poland.