

Poland can achieve its goals with a more open approach

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Twenty-seven years ago, on July 11 1996, as Poland's deputy prime minister and finance minister, I signed the act of accession to the OECD. This paved the way for my country to join the EU less than eight years later. Where does Poland stand now, as it prepares to take over the EU's six-month rotating presidency in January 2025? We held this prestigious position for the first time in 2011, but left no lasting trace on the process of European integration. How will matters turn out next time?

With national elections due later this year, we do not yet know who will be governing Poland in 2025. But we do know a great deal about the views of the rightwing Law and Justice (PiS) party, which at present holds power. President Andrzej Duda believes that Nato's eastern flank needs further strengthening, so "more United States in Europe, more European Union in the United States" is desirable. Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki likewise says that strengthening the transatlantic community "is the most important task of our [EU] presidency". This approach does not bode well.

Poland doesn't contribute to world history, but the EU does. To make the most of the Polish presidency, we should not confuse the EU's responsibilities, many of which are primarily economic in nature, with those of Nato, which is a military alliance. In this era of growing global confrontation, however, what we can do is make a political and diplomatic effort to ensure the EU and the

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larger Euro-Atlantic system competes peacefully with the Euro-Asian one. The EU is an inalienable part of both systems, a point that has obvious geopolitical implications.

During the eight years that PiS has held power, Poland's standing as a liberal democracy with independent institutions, notably the judiciary, has suffered damage. But the economy has flourished. Gross domestic product per head, at purchasing power parity, is 40 per cent higher than eight years ago. By this measure Poland ranks 40th in the world, after Estonia and before Portugal.

Yet there are better measures of the socio-economic situation. In terms of the Human Development Index, Poland is ranked 34th, between Greece and Saudi Arabia. The inequality-adjusted HDI ranks Poland 28th, just behind the US and ahead of Israel.

There is no unanimity as to what is the overriding goal of economic activity and society. Both current income and accumulated wealth are only means to an end of life satisfaction. Using the Happiness Index as a measure, Poland has moved up over the past eight years from 60th position in 2012-14 to 39th in 2020-22. With this rating, we are behind Panama and ahead of Nicaragua.

So where is Poland in this rapidly changing world? The answer to this question is important, but the most important aspect is that things do improve over time. Doubtless the situation, in terms of happiness, would be even better if not for the often nasty political atmosphere caused by the quarrel between the ruling coalition and aspiring opposition. The Happiness Index also takes into account trust in government and the extent of corruption in politics and business. In this respect, the situation has deteriorated under the rule of PiS. Perceived levels of corruption have increased since 2014.

I believe the upcoming elections in Poland will be the most important in Europe this year. Poland is now sometimes viewed as a flawed democracy, which is not what I expected when I signed our OECD accession more than a quarter of a century ago. Before the elections that brought PiS to power in 2015, things were better.

When making our choices in 2023, let's not make a mistake. Openness and pro-Europeanness are the best way for Poland to achieve its most important goals. This is the way to a better future.

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