

Towards a Knowledge-Based Society

Poland has now taken its place as a member of the European Union. This fact opens myriad opportunities and possibilities up for us, but it also entails certain dangers. One particularly serious risk is that we might succumb to intellectual laziness and, faced with the enormity and strength of EU institutions, give up our faith in being able to effectively pursue our own policies. All the more so since the economic and social system of the union we have joined is itself undergoing reform. The 1990s demonstrated that the EU lags considerably behind the United States in terms of competing on the global market. This is to a great extent due to the EU states' lesser capacity to build a so-called "knowledge-based society." An awareness of this weakness was the primary stimulus that led to the March 2000 adoption of the Lisbon strategy, a long-term program of EU socioeconomic reform. At the heart of this strategy lies the tenet that knowledge constitutes a key aspect of social development, and that we should thus support scientific research and innovative endeavors, encourage the development of the corresponding qualifications and skills, and work towards establishing an information society. What is a knowledge-based society? We might answer, somewhat in jest: a common capacity to foster, today, the conditions necessary for creating, tomorrow, new products and services - the likes of which we never even dreamed of yesterday, but which may, in turn, become completely outdated by the day after tomorrow. This definition, albeit a bit humorous, highlights the dramatic nature of the choices being made, above all as a result of the great decision-making risk and the absence of tried-and-true models to follow. But in serious terms, a knowledge-based society is one in which the processes of generating, transferring, processing, harnessing, and managing knowledge are universally recognized as key factors for civilizational and economic development. Our country's starting point here is none too promising. General statistical indicators mercilessly illustrate how far behind we are, not only with respect to the average among EU countries, but also with regards to many other newcomers. For example, the percentage of the GDP devoted to R&D in Poland currently stands at 0.64%, against 3.1% in Japan, 2.7% in the United States, 1.98% in the EU, 1.51% in Slovenia, and 1.24% in the Czech Republic. Other indicators - such as the export share of high-technology industrial products, the percentage of companies interested in innovative

production, the number of patent applications per million inhabitants, the amount of financing per researcher, and the percentage of schools that have Internet access - are no less disheartening. R&D, meanwhile, is not just a "luxury", not just something possible for wealthy countries, but also something indispensable to all ambitious societies that are still "working their way up."



Poland's population accounts for some 8.5% of the EU total. Thus, we cannot be satisfied that Polish researchers constitute only some 5.5% of all EU scientists, while our R&D spending - only 1.3% of the EU expenditures

Scientific research, the technologies it yields, and implementing state-of-the-art IT solutions in public life are of key significance for meeting the Lisbon challenges. However, they demand that we take a new look at how we finance and harness such development-conducive types of public activity.

Firstly, doing research has become an exceptionally complex process, both in terms of the subject matter itself and in terms of its organizational and financial aspects. Until recently, the driving force of science lay in research carried out by small teams of scientists on friendly terms with each other, who worked to expand fields of study in keeping with their own personal interests. For scientists themselves, today science still signifies talent and passion, it still means arduous hours spent in laboratories and at seminars, it still means dreaming of producing results that no one has ever before achieved. But in the social dimension, science is nowadays

something completely different than it was 100 or even 20 years ago. And although many researchers do not want to recognize this, change is progressing unrelentingly.

Public monitoring of how scientists spend state money is perhaps the most difficult issue. This is because the research now being done is becoming less and less comprehensible to the very societies that fund it. But allowing awareness of the specific research subject matter to remain the domain of a narrow group of specialists entails grave dangers: in particular, there is a risk that research will pursue vested interests, interests that are not necessarily consistent with those of the wider public. Increasingly, research has to take account of the interests of groups that have traditionally remained outside the world of science, such as ecologists or those opposed to experimentation on animals, and also to accept that the "end users" - society at large, as represented by the disbursers of state money - exert an influence over what kind of research is to be done.

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