

Resisting Drift

Michał Boni, head of Prime Minister Donald Tusk's team of strategic advisers, talks to Danuta Górecka and Andrzej Jonas.

■ **You are the founder and head of this opinion-forming and advisory team. Analyses, evaluations of the socioeconomic situation of Poland, compilation of strategic plans for the government... Wouldn't it be better to be a minister in the government?**

Dealing with different aspects of development, or something that today is defined as development policy and development economics, is far more interesting. You have to learn new things and the past couple of months have been a huge leap for me when it comes to opportunities to learn about new fields. I get intellectual satisfaction from it and that is something a job in the administration doesn't have, because it's boring, arduous and hard.

■ **Do you think that Donald Tusk's Cabinet is too immersed in dealing with pressing, current problems—just like the experts and advisers of all Polish governments after 1990? Is too little time spent on forward planning?**

When the political and economic transformation of the country began 20 years ago, making strategic plans was very hard, as no other country had such experience. On the other hand, decisions which were made at the time and discussions on premises for those decisions all added up to a strategic debate on the future shape of Poland. Later, we had several staging posts that shaped government strategy. Those landmarks included joining NATO and, later, the EU. Whether we were capable of making the best of those moments is a different story. The EU set certain conditions, operational programs were established. For example, Poland had to draw up a national development strategy until 2013 in conjunction with the 2007-2013 operational program concerning EU funds. When we worked on such documents back at the beginning of the transformation period, we were not yet capable of identifying the challenges of 20-plus years ahead. As for the intellectual resources of consecutive governments, they were pretty good in the sense of the intellectual potential of people, centers and institutions. Politicians in various countries, on the other hand, have never had any special skills in strategic thinking and Poland is no different. For them, concerning themselves with what will happen beyond the next elections or in 20 years is a fairy tale, whereas in reality, this fairy tale is crucial to ask oneself fundamental questions from time to time. For example, we have to ask ourselves this: are we developing and building our future consciously or is Poland just drifting on the wave of the current boom in the economy, propelled by economic growth and EU funds? If we do not want to be drifting, if we want to consciously build tools to support development, we have to realize there is no universal solution, that it all takes an intellectual and strategic debate aimed at identifying goals and the means to achieve the goals.

■ **Can Poland only develop by reproducing the experience of countries which are way ahead of us? Shouldn't we perhaps search for our own methods instead?**

Every country is entitled to draw on the experience of others, but it all really has to be redefined first. Only then can a country embark on its own development path using this as the basis. To begin with, the path has to take into consideration the country's own resources. Had people with a university education accounted for 20 percent of the

working population when the Polish political and economic transformation began after the end of communism, the transformation would have gone somewhat differently.

If we had had a lower percentage of people employed in the farming sector, which at the time was 30 percent and now is down to around 14 percent, things would have looked different as well.

■ **The only way to develop is a knowledge-based economy. Knowledge leads directly to science. What is your opinion about Polish think tanks? Can the Polish scientific community meet the economic challenges of our time?**

Polish science can answer a lot of different questions when they are asked properly. The problem is whether Polish science asks itself questions on strategy and development in many areas or if it is asked the questions. There is a tremendous amount of work to do here. It is not only about activating strategic resources in strategic and economic thinking. Sadly, in Poland this new wave of thinking about the economy is only emerging on the horizon, where the economics of development is taken into account and the term “enterprise” is used right next to “creativity.” I believe there is huge potential in Polish science and the science and practice can be close. We have recently reviewed diverse research projects connected with defense, from bioterrorism to computer science and new technologies. It turns out there is really a lot of such projects and so wouldn't it be good to find around z1.1 billion from the defense budget and thus increase spending on research and development by around 25 percent? The higher spending will, in turn, boost the resources of Polish science and, consequently, contribute to the defense sector.

■ **So think tanks are there, but one of the many skills Poland has yet to acquire is the ability to ask questions...**

That is correct. There is something else that Polish think tanks unfortunately lack. In different countries, think tanks fulfill their role when they take part in public debate. I regret to say that Poland does not have a full-fledged debate like that. We have replaced it with a public squabble, a never-ending emotional soap opera. Participation in an actual public debate requires a different understanding of the script, different actors and different costumes. It turns out we are unable to define what I consider to be a crucial social problem, the huge gap that separates young people and their aspirations from the somewhat tired generation of 50-somethings. The generation which took on the burden of communism, Solidarity and the start of the transformations and, to a large extent, is a beneficiary of the transformations. It is also full of frustration and demands. Young people, on the other hand, make their aspirations known and make no demands. “If I can't make a living here, I will go someplace else,” they say. “If I can't get enough money from my job, I'll get another one, even if it isn't legal.” Nowadays, the off-the-books tax-evading segment of the Polish economy, referred to as the “gray zone,” provides jobs for many more young people than it did 10 years ago. People hold legal jobs and admit to working illegally in some other area. Analyses of the dominant professions in the “gray zone” reveal a lot of teachers, physicians and, more recently, IT specialists. The analysis of these social changes has to be made public to make people realize what times we are living in. To show them what social energy needs to be activated to further develop and overcome this drifting. I know I am afraid of this drifting.

■ **A major aspect of public service is to skillfully navigate between society and the political class. Do you think a paradox has occurred in Poland where society is ahead of the political class?**

A large part of the public are trying to take responsibility for their own lives and for the lives of their families and employees. We live in a different Poland now. We all seem to think this Poland only lives in several major cities, while in reality, growing numbers of people in small towns and villages run small and big businesses and their children are leaving or will soon leave for colleges, including abroad. We underestimate these aspirations, this energy hidden in young people, the power that drives them forward. Structures and ideas have been changing since the early 1990s, but a psychological breakthrough has only just begun because of the demographic shift that Poland will be going through over the next several years. Future policies may make the major mistake of referring to a totally different language, different generation and different expectations. This will make the situation more dangerous. I get the impression that a lot of politicians have embraced this mistaken line of thinking. I repeat, we need to see the importance of harmony and solidarity between generations. Every generation is important and politicians must not forget about it. We must not say the young can make it unaided and so we will only think of older people. The state has to precisely define how and where it can help its people. Poland has to create tools that benefit a modern state, a country which knows exactly how it wants to build up its strength, its economy and society in the near future. Consequently, it also has to know how it should influence children who today are five years old.

■ **What makes this even more important is that Poland is facing long-term social challenges. It has to start preparing for the challenges today by investing in the intellectual capital of Polish people. Together with a team of experts, you have compiled a report entitled *The Intellectual Capital of Poland* encompassing four generations. The report does not make for optimistic reading...**

The report was not compiled to spread defeatism or try to decide who is guilty of this state of affairs. The point is to determine where we are and identify the areas where action is needed. We would like another such report to be published in 2010 to see what has changed. For a lot of countries, demographic challenges will be a key problem in the years to come, hence our decision to outline the profile of the intellectual capital from the perspective of several generations. The intellectual capital of Poland means the entire range of intangible assets of people, enterprises, communities, regions and institutions, all of which can, when used properly, generate the present and future well-being of Poland. Intellectual capital without a doubt stimulates the growth of a knowledge-based economy. Intellectual capital comprises human capital (education, experience, attitudes); structural capital (the infrastructure of the education and innovation system); social capital (norms of conduct, trust and commitment); relational capital (related to the external image of Poland, the level of integration with the global economy, the appeal to foreign customers). The quality of education is of great importance. We have people who graduate in different majors and teach one specific subject, but the teaching and communication skills they obtain in Poland are more or less 40 years behind the rest of the world. A tremendous challenge and another major step is to alter syllabuses, work on selection criteria for the teaching profession and provide young teachers with a good start.

■ **But education is booming in Poland, with 508 university students for every 10,000 citizens, which puts Poland in sixth place internationally in this respect. This is a huge intellectual potential...**

Fantastic, isn't it? But things do not look so good when it comes to teaching quality. The future is only bright for universities which provide education at the highest level. Good universities need assistance, better conditions for development, while the rest

will have to readjust. In the report, we seek to sensitize ourselves to all the factors which should build such resources for a knowledge- based economy.

■ **The report is a diagnosis of sorts. As such, it should be followed by suggestions for treatment. Are you going to form a think tank to come up with treatment methods?**

We are working on such “treatment” in many areas. Together with the team, I am deeply engaged in questions of education, science and health. We want to change mechanisms, structures and programs.

■ **Does the government understand the issues you have pointed out adequately?**

My “therapy” suggestions are gaining supporters, especially among young people holding senior positions in the administration. In our country, the philosophy of law is inherent in the constitution and protects the young democracy from too much executive authority. This may become an obstacle for development, because the current legal framework generates over-regulation with too many rigid regulations which give the state more power than it really needs. Flexibility is necessary in many areas; you notice a new phenomenon and you make a relatively quick decision, with corrections if necessary. In the rapidly changing world of today, it is impossible to carry on and be unable to make any corrections. Meanwhile, Polish legal regulations determine lots of different things in too much detail. As a result, when reality changes, a law needs to be changed. When a law has to be changed, an entire process has to be carried out and that takes months. In other words, over-regulation is one of the elements that cause Poland’s development inefficiency. What we need is normal, efficient regulations.