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Panel discussion report: International Organizations and Multilateralism: a View from Central Europe (The Paris Debate)

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Anna Visvizi

Panel discussion report: International Organizations and Multilateralism: a View from Central Europe (*The Paris Debate*)

Title of the panel discussion:

International Organizations and Multilateralism: A View from Central Europe (*The Paris Debate*)

Organizers:

- Permanent Representation of Poland to the OECD
- Institute of East-Central Europe (IESW)
- Scientific Centre of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN) in Paris

URL: <http://www.iesw.lublin.pl/projekty/pics/181-debataOECD.jpg>

Venue:

Scientific Centre of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Paris74, rue Lauriston - 75116 Paris

Date:

February 19, 2018

Time: 1800-2000

Speakers (in alphabetical order):

HE Ingrid Brockova, Ambassador of Slovakia to the OECD

HE Zoltán Cséfalvay, Ambassador of Hungary to the OECD

HE Petr Gandalovic, Ambassador of Czech Republic to the OECD

HE Irena Sodin, Ambassador of Slovenia to the OECD

HE Marlies Stubits-Weidinger, Ambassador of Austria to the OECD

HE Aleksander Surdej, Ambassador of Poland to the OECD

Moderator: Dr. Anna Visvizi, IESW, Lublin, Poland

International organizations, each in its own way, have played an important role in assisting the countries from Central and Eastern Europe in the challenging process of systemic transition. Specialization of goals, membership requirements and conditionality, enhanced by specialization of assistance and aid sequencing, played a mediating role between these countries' elites and third actors involved in the transition process. In this view, membership in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) was a much sought-after objective that these countries pursued, in that it served as a symbolic confirmation of a belonging to a group of countries aspiring to lead by example, best-practice sharing and friendly peer-review. More than 25 years since the collapse of communism, the question of the role of international organizations, and, more broadly, the virtue of multilateralism, need to be rethought. Arguably, times have changed and Fukuyama's predictions of the end of history have been dearly tested. Clearly, a new set of factors and forces unfolds at the surface of politics and economics at national, regional and global levels today, thus inducing new dynamics, interdependencies and direct and indirect causal relationships. Against this backdrop, the objective of the Paris Debate was to rethink the value added, the relevance and sustainability of international organizations and multilateralism today, with the spotlight shed on the OECD.

The panelists included Permanent Representatives of the OECD, HE Ambassadors of Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia. They were joined, from the stage, by Permanent Representatives to the OECD, Ambassadors of Ireland, Germany, the EU, and the US. The discussion revolved around the following topics and issues: What is the value-added of multilateral forums of deliberation, consensus building and decision-making?

- What are the sources of power and legitimacy of established multilateral forums?

- How to ensure that they function in a manner that, while efficient, fulfils the key imperatives of accountability and representation?
- How to shield international organizations from misuse and instrumentalization?
- How to ensure that multilateral forums will indeed serve the interest of the state itself?
- How to ensure that the international organizations and other forms of multilateral dialogue provide global public goods in right forms and quantities.

Brief outline of the discussion

International organizations, multilateralism and support for systemic transition

The exquisite setting of the belle époque building of the Polish Academy of Science in Paris lend itself to a lively and edgy debate on the meaning and value added of multilateralism today. The panellists, all seasoned diplomats and experts in the field, representing all countries of the broadly defined region of Central Europe engaged in a thorough reflection on the value added of multilateralism and international organizations today. The speakers stressed that the twin notions of multilateralism and international organizations had been particularly relevant for the historical experience and current debates in Central Europe. Undoubtedly, a great number of third actors (state and non-state alike) were involved in supporting the transition process, but the supportive role of the OECD has been fundamental in this respect.

International organizations, multilateralism and their relevance

Discussing multilateralism, the Ambassadors stressed the importance of definitional precision. Which institutions should be considered international organizations, and which not (especially the intergovernmental ones)? What, in this sense, defines the thrust of multilateralism? In this context, the panellists upheld the question of the very purpose of international organizations and the challenge of them remaining relevant in face of changing socio-economic and political circumstances. To what extent and under which conditions, international organizations can effectively provide public goods? Practice suggests

that it remains an open question how to ensure that international organizations sustainably serve as a forum of dialogue, socialization and consensus building.

International organizations, multilateralism and their value added

The case of the OECD suggests, so the panellists argued, that international organizations can offer a unique, bias-free forum of debate and best-practice sharing. In this sense, synergies emerge that – if effectively embraced – can play a role in designing and implementing coherent, empirically-driven, and targeted policies at national levels.

International organizations, multilateralism and the need for reform

In the discussion the contested question of international organizations' relevance and efficiency was brought to the surface. Due to the very friendly milieu of the debate, the panellists succeeded in pointing out the key questions and issues pertaining to the prospect of reforming multilateralism as we know it. The following dimensions of the reform process were highlighted: leadership, accountability, legitimacy, coordination and its efficiency, resources, membership, and representation, transparency and members' equality and many more. The Ambassadors stressed that while the prospective reform process needs to be incremental, they also suggested that several intervening factors need to be taken into account, incl. geopolitics, the emergence of sophisticated technologies, emergent risks and threats.

The debate was joined by several other top-notch diplomats, including the Permanent Representative to the OECD of Ireland, Germany, the EU and the US, who added excellent points to the discussion. The contribution of the audience, including the warm reception of the panellists and incisive questions, needs to be emphasized. A warm 'thank you' and gratitude are expressed to Ms Katarzyna Kula, Scientific Centre of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN) in Paris, and Ms Edyta Michelin, Permanent Representation of Poland to the OECD, Paris, for their input in the coordination of the event. The assistance of PAN volunteers and interns is gratefully acknowledged. Appreciation is expressed to Professor Maciej Forycki, Director of the Scientific Centre of PAN in Paris who embraced the idea of organizing the debate and opened the premises of PAN in Paris to host it. Words of recognition for the idea and its implementation as well as congratu-

lations on the success of the Paris Debate are addressed to HE Ambassador Professor Aleksander Surdej. Dr. Anna Visvizi, Institute of East-Central Europe (IESW), supported the organization of the event and contributed to it. It remains to be seen if the Paris Debate will be given the opportunity to develop into a cyclical event, thus strengthening Poland's international exposure.