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"Getting to Denmark": A Blueprint for How to Keep Poland's Economic Miracle Going

"Getting to Denmark" is a phrase popularized by Francis Fukuyama (2011), which has become a metaphor for the challenge of creating institutions, improving state capacity, and building public accountability in poor countries so that they can become as rich and prosperous as Denmark. But Denmark does not need to be a blueprint for developing countries only: it can also show the way for economically successful countries like Poland.

Since 1990, Poland has been Europe's growth champion, increasing its GDP per capita PPP by more than 260 percent, more than any other economy on the continent (Piatkowski, 2025). As a result, in 2025, Poland reached 81 percent of the average EU income level, the highest ever and a testament to the country's Golden Age. On current trends, and if reforms continue, Poland could reach 100 percent of the EU average income level by around 2040.

But catching up with the EU average could spell the end of the Golden Age. Much of Poland's growth so far has come from absorbing capital, technology, and know-how from richer neighbors, a source of catch-up growth whose importance diminishes as the income gap closes. At the same time, demographics are turning negative, with the labor force shrinking by almost 200,000 people a year and aging. Most countries have stalled in their convergence toward the EU average income level. Some, like Spain, have even regressed: in 2007, Spain's GDP per capita in PPS peaked at 105 percent of the EU average and then began to decline. By 2025, it had fallen back to only 92 percent. Poland could repeat the same pattern. To avoid it, Poland needs an adjusted growth model, and the place to look for inspiration is among the countries that have become truly rich.

The global elite of countries with per capita incomes in PPP terms exceeding 120 percent of the EU average is surprisingly thin. If one excludes tax havens (such as Luxembourg or Ireland), small economies (such as Liechtenstein), oil-rich countries (such as Norway, the UAE, and Qatar), global hubs like Singapore or Hong Kong, and the special case of the United States, there are just four truly rich economies in the world: Switzerland, Taiwan, the Netherlands, and Denmark. South Korea, a well-known global success story, is only marginally richer than the EU and does not qualify.

Among those four success stories, Taiwan does not seem to be a good blueprint for Poland. Its Asian-style threadbare welfare state, with social spending relative to GDP at only half of Poland's, is something Poles could hardly accept. It also has a high degree of concentration in a single industry and low openness to foreign investment, with FDI stock below 20 percent of GDP against roughly 40 percent in Poland. Switzerland, whose global economic position is unique due to the strength of its banking and manufacturing sectors, low taxes, direct democracy, and a geographic position that insulates it from external threats, does not seem to fit the bill either. The Netherlands is a closer fit, but its growth model rests on global ports, trade, a business-services cluster of a scale no other EU economy has, and a manufacturing sector only half the size of Poland's as a share of value added. Poland can hardly copy this model.

This leaves Denmark as the closest blueprint. It is geographically the closest of the four, is as open as Poland to foreign trade and investment, enjoys a level of work-life balance and quality of life that most Poles aspire to, and shares similar concerns about regional security, especially regarding Russia.

What exactly would Poland be copying? At least three main features define the Danish model. The first is flexicurity: Danish employers can dismiss workers almost at will, but the unemployed keep close to two-thirds of their previous earnings, and the state spends around 2 percent of GDP on retraining and job placement, several times what Poland spends. Labor moves between firms and sectors instead of being protected in place, which is what a shrinking workforce requires. The second is a high-tax, high-trust bargain: Denmark collects 45.5 percent of GDP in taxes and social contributions against roughly 37.6 percent in Poland (Eurostat, 2025). The third is a diversified export base built on pharmaceuticals, wind, shipping, and

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food processing rather than a single champion sector, supported by a group of global champion firms: Novo Nordisk in diabetes and obesity treatment, Maersk in container shipping, Vestas and Ørsted in wind power, alongside Lego, Carlsberg, Danfoss, and Grundfos.

Poles, like the rest of the world, want to be like Denmark. In the 2026 Best Countries Index, a perception survey of more than 15,000 adults across 33 countries conducted by the Wharton School and U.S. News & World Report (2026), Denmark ranks second in the world for perceived quality of life, behind Sweden. Gallup's World Poll and its Potential Net Migration Index tell the same story: relative to their own populations, the Nordic countries attract among the highest potential inflows of people who would move there if they could. Denmark also sits at or near the top of the World Happiness Report year after year (Helliwell et al., 2026).

How Can Poland Be Like Denmark? The "5i" Agenda.

Denmark's model cannot be transplanted wholesale: Poland's population is six times larger, its social and cultural norms differ, its level of social trust is lower, and its economic structure is much more SME- and manufacturing-heavy. But the Danish example remains relevant. It can be adapted to the "5i" framework, developed by Piatkowski (2025), a set of policy directions focused on institutions, investment, innovation, immigration, and inclusiveness, aimed at helping Poland become one of the richest and most important economies in the Union.

Poland has much to do across all five dimensions to catch up with Denmark. According to the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators, Poland's quality of institutions is only 75 percent of Denmark's level and lower still for the rule of law and control of corruption. Getting to Denmark would require, for instance, much faster resolution of commercial court disputes, including by "e-courts," where AI could generate draft judgments to be approved by judges. Faster courts, better policy predictability, and lower business compliance costs should help raise Poland's investment rate, currently one of the lowest in the EU at around 17 percent of GDP, closer to Denmark's 23 percent. A large part of the increase in investment could be directed toward R&D, on which Poland spends only half as much as Denmark relative to GDP, helping to build Poland's equivalents of Novo Nordisk or Vestas. Higher R&D spending would also need to be supported by a points-based smart immigration policy focused on attracting global scientific, entrepreneurial, and innovative talent. Finally, although Poland's level of income inequality is not much higher than in Denmark (according to official estimates, in 2025 the Gini coefficient for Poland stood at 0.29, only marginally above the Danish level), other methodological approaches to measuring income inequality, including those based on tax returns, suggest that inequality may be much higher, placing Poland among the most unequal countries in the EU (Brzeziński, Bukowski, and Sawulski, 2024). To reduce inequality and increase social mobility, Poland could follow Denmark in adopting a more progressive tax system, including by introducing additional PIT rates, eliminating or reducing preferential regimes for the self-employed, and increasing taxes on residential real estate.

Poland has the best chance in more than a thousand years of its history to fully catch up with the West by 2040. But this historic milestone could mark the end of the growth miracle and a reversion to the European mean, as suggested by the earlier experience of other countries. Denmark's example shows that the next stage is a matter of choice rather than luck. It rests on strong institutions, flexible labor markets matched with income security, and a high level of innovation. None of this can be directly transplanted, but each element can be adapted to Poland's own developmental path. What Poland needs is the mindset of a champion and a belief that it can join the narrow global elite of rich countries such as Denmark. If this happens, Poland's miracle will truly live up to its name.

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