

Polish Cities Need to Work Together

In order to attract more conventions and conferences to this country, Polish cities need to work together rather than wasting resources by competing against each other, Paul Kennedy, a British expert and owner of Kennedy Integrated Solutions, an international meetings industry business consultancy, tells the *Voice* in an interview.

■ Let's start with the meetings industry internationally. What are the main trends visible? To what extent is the industry contributing to economic growth?

The underlying industry trend is undeniably up, with demand for meetings, conventions, conferences of all types increasing, and the supply even more so, with new centers, hotels and air routes being opened very frequently. The destination world is developing fast, with new destinations emerging regularly, but with some of the tragic incidents of recent months the position of a city or a whole country can be terribly affected. For example, the MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Events) industry in Egypt is seriously depressed yet Cairo has been peaceful by many international standards for some years. Meanwhile, Paris, one of the world's great meetings cities, through no fault of its own will have to rebuild confidence that it is a safe place to hold meetings [following the Nov. 13 terror attacks in the French capital].

As to the impact of the meetings and events business on a nation's GDP, this can be surprising—who would have thought that in the United States the world of meetings and events employs more than the automotive industry, and in the UK more than agriculture?

I am certain the world of events and meetings is set to gain wider recognition as an economic multiplier with major benefits, including the transfer of business, scientific and technological know-how.

■ What do you think are the prospects of the meetings industry in Poland, including in Warsaw, which you visited recently?

My recent visit to Poland was the first in over seven years and I was surprised and impressed at the extent of the meetings infrastructure in Warsaw. It's important for destinations to market themselves but this needs to be done in a planned and realistic way. The role of city and national convention bureaux is vital.



■ What does Poland need to do to attract more international meetings, conferences and congresses?

The key is for Polish destinations to work together and again I stress the important role of city and national convention bureaux. The key is to get events to Poland rather than Polish cities spending a silly level of resources on competing against each other. It's important to bid for business that can be comfortably accommodated in a city, not business that will overstretch resources.

■ What are the key factors that make international meetings organizers choose a particular destination?

There are lots of reasons and, frankly, weather, gastronomy and culture are not high on the list. Research shows that the most important criteria are the accessibility of the destination/principal meetings venue, and price/price flexibility. Also important are quality of service, quality of facilities and personal safety, with this last issue once again rearing its head recently. Also key is newness/difference. Speed of response to inquiries is also important and, for me, a very important issue is the people involved in the supply chain in a given destination working together as a team.

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Convening in Warsaw

Michał Olszewski, deputy mayor of Warsaw, talks to Juliusz Kłosowski about how Warsaw can benefit from inbound tourism and the meetings industry.

■ What role do you think inbound tourism should play in Warsaw's development in the future? And what about the meetings industry?

Inbound tourism and the meetings industry are one of the many business sectors with potential to create jobs and stimulate growth in the city. This is not a leading sector as far as the city's revenues are concerned, but it has huge potential for growth in Warsaw even without support from City Hall. I believe the city should have the tools to bolster the market for tourism services, including conferences and conventions. This is important to the local market because tourism services help increase the number of jobs both directly and indirectly. They strengthen Warsaw's recognition as a brand abroad and support a positive image of the city. Importantly, international experience shows that the growth of tourism, including the meetings industry, usually matches the rate at which cities grow economically. And that's important in terms of ensuring steady and well-balanced economic development. The development strategy for Warsaw that we have been working on will to an extent aim to stimulate inbound tourism, and that includes bringing conferences and conventions to the city.

■ What responsibilities related to marketing, inbound tourism and the meetings industry are you planning to outsource to an external destination marketing organization (DMO)?

We are indeed going to dramatically change relations between the city administration, the Warsaw Tourism Office and the Warsaw Tourist Organization, aiming to significantly expand the responsibilities of the latter. It is too early to give any details as these issues will become more specific in the coming months, but the decisions will definitely be made next year.

■ Do you think Warsaw needs a conference and convention center as large as those in other EU capitals?

Warsaw has convention and exhibition centers with a capacity of 1,000 to 5,000 people. This is the largest and most competitive segment of the market for conventions, conferences, exhibitions and trade fairs, whether in Warsaw, Poland or elsewhere. We have been closely following decisions made by an investor who is planning to turn a commercial area with halls in a Warsaw suburb into a huge exhibition and convention center. According to the investor, the center will be capable of accommodating major events, exhibitions in particular.

What Warsaw lacks is a venue specifically designed to host really large conventions with 10,000 and more people in attendance.



Such venues in major European cities evidently stimulate local markets to grow. But when cities such as Hanover, Vienna and Munich invested in that kind of infrastructure Poland was still behind the Iron Curtain. We want to take advantage of that now, of course, because we are able to skip certain stages and build a venue that will instantly meet the meetings industry's highest standards. We need to study the market carefully, however, if we want to avoid taking a large part of events away from existing venues and those that are under development. The risk is there, especially in the short term. This is why this year, we have started dialogue with meetings industry insiders to discuss what the new convention infrastructure should be like. We have conducted surveys and are going to thoroughly analyze all these issues.

■ Vacant space near Warsaw's state-of-the-art National Stadium—which was built especially for the 2012 European soccer championships and is located not far from the city center—has for years been mentioned as a potential site for a large convention center. What are the odds that such a project will indeed be undertaken there?

It is hard to tell for now, but it is no secret that the previous sports and tourism minister appointed a task force to check how the area could be developed. This is the most natural location for a venue like that and, in fact, the local zoning plan assigns the area for such purposes. We are in the middle of commissioning a thorough study to give a more accurate assessment of the impact such a project would have in this location. How would the market respond to it? How would it affect other market players in the meetings industry and what impact would it have on this part of the city business-wise? And what would its effect be on Warsaw's economic development as a whole? We are seeking the best way. This is a time-consuming process, but one that guarantees success.

Please don't get me wrong: I am confident that the Warsaw market for conferences and conventions will grow even if it only utilizes what is already there in terms of infrastructure. But a new convention center, if designed optimally, could become a strong stimulating factor. I'm certain that such a step could be taken. This is one of the first things I am going to bring up to the new sports and

tourism minister. His stance on the matter is crucial and I expect that decisions concerning the convention center will be made next year.

■ To a large extent, many cities in Europe and around the world fund their convention-related tourism products with small fees that are levied on all visitors. The idea to enable local authorities to collect such fees has been debated in Poland for several years. What is Warsaw City Hall's opinion on this?

We are absolutely in favor of the idea. This a proven method to supplement local budgets with considerable funds to be spent on promoting the city and other projects aimed at developing local tourism products. Poland needs new regulations on this, a new law perhaps. Consequently, we want to join forces with all those concerned, including other cities, and start work on drafting and then passing appropriate regulations.

Poland Meetings Destination



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