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Banking reform in a transition economy: The case of Poland

Thomas S. Mondschean and Timothy P. Opiela

The demise of several Communist-led governments in Central and Eastern Europe has given way to an economic transformation of these nations that may be as important to the people who live there as the political transformation has been. These countries are trying to reduce the use of central planning and rely more on the behavior of firms and households operating in open markets to improve economic decisionmaking and resource allocation. However, the transformation has not progressed as quickly or as smoothly as originally hoped. Moreover, basic policy disagreements continue over the pace of privatization, the conditions under which foreign firms should be allowed to enter a nation's market or buy its existing firms, and other issues central to the process of economic reform.

To understand better the difficulties policymakers face in reforming these economies, we focus on one aspect of the economic transition, banking reform, in one transition economy, Poland. A country's banking system exists to collect funds from savers and lend them to borrowers, as well as to provide an efficient payments mechanism. A system's ability to allocate funds as efficiently as possible to finance productive investment and consumption expenditures is crucial in producing a high and sustainable rate of economic growth. Under central planning, however, the state directed the distribution of funds throughout the economy with no regard for their most productive use. The institutional infrastructure and incentive structure necessary for decentralized credit allocation decisions based on rational economic criteria never developed.

The issues Poland has faced in reforming its banking system are similar to those confronting other transition economies. The banking system emerged from the Communist era with little capital, a large portfolio of nonperforming loans, no meaningful system of accounting, little recourse for lenders in the event of default, technologically backward operations, and inadequately trained staff. Prudential regulatory and supervisory capabilities to address moral hazard incentives and corruption were almost nonexistent. In addition, by the end of the 1980s, the country was on the brink of hyperinflation,

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which was eroding public confidence in the Polish currency, the złoty.

Poland's banking problems also bear similarities to those of developed economies. Even though Poland has been making the transition toward a market economy for several years, the majority of its banking system assets are still controlled by the state. Thus, deciding how and when to privatize commercial banks is an important issue. However, some of Poland's largest banks are undercapitalized and have inadequate resources to address their nonperforming loan problems. Privatizing poorly capitalized banks can create a moral hazard incentive that would raise the cost of resolving bank failures in the future, a situation we have seen develop in many countries in recent years. For example, the problems in the U.S. banking and savings and loan industries in the 1980s—inadequately capitalized institutions, insufficient regulatory oversight, and an unwillingness to address the moral hazard incentives caused by generous deposit insurance guarantees—led to a large taxpayer-financed bailout and congressional reform. The knowledge gained in the U.S. can help policymakers in Poland to avoid similar mistakes.

Another topic of current interest in Poland is whether the banking industry should consolidate to improve efficiency and better serve larger firms. Some believe that existing Polish banks are too small and too regional in nature to compete effectively; hence, they favor merging regional banks to form larger banking groups. Given that the U.S. has also been undergoing a period of banking consolidation and expansion across state lines, an understanding of the pros and cons of consolidation in Poland broadens our understanding of the issue.

A third issue concerns policy on foreign financial institutions wishing to operate in Poland. Some foreign banks have entered the Polish market by acquiring an equity stake in an existing bank, while others have built their operations from scratch. On the one hand, Poles recognize that foreign banks bring in modern technology, management techniques, and additional capital, which can enhance the quality and sophistication of the financial services offered to the public. On the other hand, they fear that domestic institutions will be unable to compete effectively and that foreign banks will dominate the Polish banking system. Given Poland's history of being dominated by foreign countries, there is a strong feeling that allowing foreign banks to gain the upper hand would not be in the country's best interests in the long run. Many countries, including the U.S., have confronted this issue.

While Poland has come a long way in reforming its banking system, in our view more progress needs to be made before Polish banks can operate efficiently. We believe the key problem facing Polish banks today is not that they are too small but that they have too little capital. Without adequate capital, these banks are constrained to hold large amounts of government securities instead of making commercial loans. As a result, less credit is available to businesses and households than would otherwise be the case. Consolidating banks without infusing capital would not improve the situation; indeed, the cost of consolidation would reduce capital adequacy even further. Improving capital adequacy, in our opinion, should be a higher priority than encouraging consolidation.

Below, we present an overview of the banking reform program and the impact of economic conditions on the banking industry in the first few years of the transition. We analyze the performance of Polish banks during the 1990s. Then we discuss the most pressing issues facing both the government and the industry in the years to come.

Banking reform at the beginning of the transition

Under Communist control from the end of World War II to the end of the 1980s, Poland's banking system became highly centralized and primarily served as a conduit for transferring funds between the central government and the various state enterprises that controlled the country's economic life. The most important financial institution, the National Bank of Poland (NBP), served as both central bank and supplier of credit to key industries. Decisions on monetary policy, the allocation of credit to borrowers, and the scope of the NBP's operations were made by the central government. The NBP was directly responsible to the Ministry of Finance, with the president of the NBP serving as Undersecretary of State at the ministry.

During the 1980s, the Polish government began reforming the banking system. The Banking Act of 1982 separated the NBP from the Ministry of Finance and required parliamentary approval for the appointment of the president of the NBP. This act also legalized the formation of private banks as joint stock companies with or without foreign equity participation. However, the NBP continued to perform the functions of both a central and a commercial bank until 1989, when the Parliament passed a new Banking Act and the National Bank of Poland Act. Approximately 400 regional branch offices of the NBP were converted into nine regional, state-owned commercial banks, as listed in table 1. These banks, centered in major cities, inherited a substantial part of the NBP's commercial loan portfolio, consisting primarily of loans to existing state-owned enterprises (SOEs). As the first step in the ultimate privatization of these banks, in September and October 1991 the nine banks were converted into joint stock companies wholly owned by the Ministry of Finance. To date, four of the nine have been privatized, with their stocks trading on the Warsaw Stock Exchange.

The remainder of the NBP became a traditional central bank in the western sense, holding reserves, issuing currency, advancing credit to the banking system, overseeing the payments system, and holding part of the debt of the Polish government. The independence of the central bank was reinforced by law, with the president of the NBP now nominated by the President of Poland and confirmed by Parliament. In addition to its monetary policy functions, the reorganized NBP is responsible for supervision and regulation of the banking system.[1]

By 1990, the government owned six other specialized banks (also listed in table 1). PKO BP was separated from the NBP in 1988. Its primary functions were to accept household deposits and advance loans to finance public housing construction. The bank has a nationwide network of branches and other outlets and the largest share of total deposits (26.8 percent

TABLE 1

Structure of the Polish banking industry

	City	Total assets	Percent of total banking assets
		(million złoty)	
The nine commercial banks			
Bank Depozytowo-Kredytowy	Lublin	3,658.8	2.1
Bank Gdański	Gdańsk	4,636.6	2.7
Bank Przemysłowo-Handlowy (BPH)	Kraków	7,448.3	4.3
Bank Zachodni	Wrocław	5,048.7	2.9
Pomorski Bank Kredytowy (PBKS)	Szczecin	3,661.6	2.1
Powszechny Bank Gospodarczy (PBG)	Łódź	9,181.0	5.4
Powszechny Bank Kredytowy	Warsaw	8,373.5	4.9
Wielkopolski Bank Kredytowy (WBK)	Poznań	5,035.9	2.9
Bank Śląski	Katowice	8,683.7	5.1
Total for the nine banks		**55,728.1**	**32.5**
The specialist banks			
Powszechna Kasa Oszczędności - Bank Państwowy (PKO BP)	Nationwide	35,839.1	20.9
Polska Kasa Opieki SA (Pekao SA)	Nationwide	21,679.3	12.6
Bank Handlowy	Warsaw	12,731.4	7.4
Bank Gospodarki Żywnościowej (BGŻ)	Warsaw	13,153.1	7.7
Polski Bank Rozwoju (PBR)	Warsaw	1,263.0	0.7
Bank Rozwoju Eksportu (BRE)	Warsaw	3,621.5	2.1
Total for the specialist banks		**88,287.4**	**51.5**
Other banks		27,475.7	16.0

Note: Total assets data are for September 30, 1996.
Source: *Gazeta Bankowa,* December 8, 1996.

as of the end of June 1996) of any bank in Poland. Pekao SA offers deposit accounts denominated in foreign currencies through its nationwide branch network, and serves as a vehicle for overseas Poles to remit funds to their relatives in Poland. As of June 30, 1996, it held 16.8 percent of Poland's total deposits. Bank Handlowy, which was started in 1870, is a major corporate bank providing a wide range of financial services, including foreign trade financing. BGŻ, the Bank for Food Economy, is the primary supplier of credit to the agricultural sector. The bank is owned partly by the national government and partly by over 1,200 local cooperative banks, which offer deposit accounts and loans to private farmers and self-employed craftsmen. BRE, the Export Development Bank, was established in 1987 to provide trade financing and competition for Bank Handlowy and Pekao SA. This bank was privatized in 1992. Finally, PBR, the Polish Development Bank, was established in 1990. It operates primarily as a banker's bank, channeling funds to other banks from foreign credit lines or its own resources. It has also been involved in the organization and development of the Polish interbank money market.

During the early part of the transition, the growth of privately owned banks was encouraged. In an effort to increase competition among banks, the government liberalized entry requirements for the establishment of new banks. For example, the minimum amount of capital needed to secure a banking license at the end of 1989 was 400,000 złoty, approximately $61,500 at the prevailing exchange rate.[2] Moreover, the rules concerning the background and experience of bank owners and managers were not rigorously enforced. As a result of the liberal entry policy, the number of banks in Poland expanded from six in 1988 to 75 by the end of 1990.

The economic environment in the early years of the transition

As Poland's first non-Communist government since the end of World War II assumed power in September 1989, the economy was in serious difficulty. To curry favor with the electorate prior to the 1989 parliamentary elections, the previous government had increased government spending and paid for it by increasing the money stock. As a result, the budget deficit soared to 7.4 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 1989, and the inflation rate rose from an already high 60.2 percent in 1988 to 251.1 percent in 1989. (Selected economic statistics are presented in table 2.) After some discussion of what kind of economic reform program to put in place, the Polish government implemented what came to be known as the Balcerowicz Plan, a bold program of "shock therapy" designed to speed the process of economic liberalization and make it extremely difficult for a future government to go back to the previous system.[3] Almost all prices in the economy were decontrolled in 1990, while at the same time consumer and producer subsidies were cut from 12.9 percent of GDP in 1989 to 7.3 percent in 1990, 5.1 percent in 1991, and 3.3 percent in 1992. As a result of the lifting of price controls and the lagged effects of the expansionary monetary policy, inflation worsened in 1990 to 585.8 percent.

Another aspect of the Balcerowicz Plan was to promote greater competition among Polish industries. As a result of central planning, most Polish industries were highly concentrated, and the fear was that decontrolling prices would lead to monopolistic pricing policies that would reduce overall social welfare. The government addressed this issue by eliminating all nontariff restrictions on imports and reducing the average tariff rate from 13.3 percent to 8 percent. Foreign competition, it was hoped, would hold in check the desire of large industrial enterprises to raise prices and also give these firms an incentive to improve quality and service to their customers. At the same time, the Polish złoty was devalued by 31.6 percent from 0.65 to 0.95 złoty per dollar to give Polish firms an initial competitive advantage over their foreign competitors.

The initial effects of the Balcerowicz Plan were positive. The government budget actually showed a surplus of 2.8 percent of GDP in 1990. The quantity and variety of goods available for sale expanded, and lines to purchase scarce consumer goods, a fact of life under Communism, disappeared. The currency devaluation initially helped Polish exporters. A spirit of optimism pervaded the country and was bolstered by the fall of Communism in neighboring countries. The initial euphoria over political and economic reform, however, gave way to a severe recession, with declines in real GDP of 11.6 percent in 1990 and 7.6 percent in 1991. There were several causes. First, the rapid change in relative prices brought about by deregulation forced businesses to restructure quickly or close their doors. Unemployment grew rapidly and industrial production fell. Second, the shift in the government budget from deficit in 1989 to surplus in 1990 was, in effect, a substantial tightening of fiscal policy, which in time would have a dampening effect on the growth of aggregate demand. Third, in an effort to contain inflation, the NBP adopted a more restrictive monetary policy and interest rates soared. Thus, even if firms could gain access to credit, the price of credit was very high. Fourth, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Poland lost its largest export market. Finally, Western Europe was undergoing a recession of its own during this period, which further reduced demand for Polish exports. Not surprisingly, the rate of unemployment rose dramatically from almost zero in 1988 to 11.8 percent by the end of 1991.

Effect of economic reform on the banking system

The volatile conditions that persisted in the economy also affected the banking sector. In terms of reported income, bank profits were positive at the beginning of the transition. In particular, 1990 was an excellent year, with the industry earning 1.66 billion złoty, which represented a return on assets of 7.2 percent. The high rate of net income was primarily due to the banks' ability to hold deposit interest rates below the rate of inflation while earning a positive real return on loans; hence, the industry recorded a net interest margin of 17 percent of total assets during 1990. Net income fell in nominal terms by 13.5 percent in 1991 to 1.44 billion złoty, and rose in 1992 by 4.3 percent to 1.5 billion złoty. Adjusted for inflation, however, net income fell by 49 percent in 1991 and by 27.1 percent in 1992. The deterioration in the industry's net profit position was based in part on greater competition in both the loan

TABLE 2

Selected economic indicators, 1989–96

	Units	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
GDP (current prices)	bil. złoty	11.8	59.2	80.9	114.9	155.8	210.4	286.0	351.7[a]
Inflation (CPI)	%	251.1	585.8	70.3	43.0	35.3	32.2	27.8	19.9
Real GDP growth	%	0.2	−11.6	−7.6	1.5	3.8	5.3	7.0	6.0[a]
Government budget surplus	% of GDP	−7.4	2.8	−2.0	−4.9	−2.3	−2.2	−1.8	−2.4
Unemployment rate	% (yearend)	6.1	11.5	11.8	13.6	15.7	16.0	14.9	14.0[a]
Current account balance	bil. $	−1.8	0.7	−2.2	−0.3	−2.3	0.9	−2.3	−1.0[b]
External debt	bil. $	49.0	48.0	47.6	48.4	47.3	42.2	43.9	42.9[c]
Exchange rate	złoty/$ (yearend)	0.7	1.0	1.2	1.6	2.1	2.4	2.5	2.9
Total currency in circulation	bil. złoty (yearend)	1.0	3.9	5.6	7.8	10.0	12.3	19.5	23.6
Annual growth rate	%	91.5	298.1	42.8	38.8	28.0	23.0	59.1	20.6
Currency plus domestic deposits	bil. złoty (yearend)	NA	13.1	19.7	30.9	39.8	55.2	83.0	111.1
Annual growth rate	%	NA	NA	50.3	57.3	12.9	38.7	50.2	34.0
Currency plus domestic and foreign deposits	bil. złoty (yearend)	NA	19.1	26.1	41.1	55.9	77.3	104.3	134.5
Annual growth rate	%	NA	NA	36.9	57.5	36.0	38.2	34.2	29.0

[a]1996 figures are estimates.
[b]For 11 months of 1996.
[c]Through September 1996.
Note: NA is not available.
Sources: GDP figures are from the Central Statistics Office in Warsaw. All other figures are from the National Bank of Poland, *Information Bulletins*, various years.

and deposit markets, which reduced the net interest rate spread to 3.7 percent of total assets by 1992.

However, these profit data do not reflect the true economic deterioration of Polish banks during the 1990–92 period for several reasons. First, in 1990 and 1991 banks were required to record interest accrued on loans but not actually paid by borrowers as income. This had the effect of overstating the actual income that banks were receiving, as well as depleting the industry's capital since banks had to pay income tax on profits they did not actually receive. The Ministry of Finance finally rectified this situation in 1992, leading to lower reported interest income in 1992 and subsequent years.

A second reason bank profit figures overstated the sector's performance was the deteriorating condition of the economy and the banks' response. Real GDP fell 18.3 percent from 1989 to 1991. Much of the decline was concentrated among the large SOEs, but these firms were unable or unwilling to restructure their operations in response to falling demand for their output. As a result, these firms were unable to service their loans and needed additional credit to cover their losses. Because they had always been bailed out by the government in the past and their size meant they could not be closed without a huge increase in local unemployment, they had little incentive to change. For the most part, the banks chose to extend the loan repayment period and convert the unpaid interest into principal rather than declare the loan to be in default or initiate other workout procedures. This increased these banks' overall risk exposure. Moreover, because they were among the largest firms in Poland and at the time there were no restrictions on the amount a bank could lend to one customer, their solvency could be jeopardized by the default of a small number of borrowers.

A third reason the accounting data masked the deterioration of bank capital was that banks did not add enough to their loan loss reserves as the amount of nonperforming loans was increasing. One reason for this was that only provisions made for loans classified as lost were tax deductible; provisions for loans classified as doubtful or substandard are not tax deductible. In addition, the degree of regulatory oversight was low because the NBP did not have legal authority to enforce provisioning standards until March 1992. Thus, banks had little incentive to provision against potential loan losses, so the amount of reported capital on their balance sheets overstated their true net worth.

An examination of problem loans reported by Polish banks sheds some light on the extent of the bad loan problem in the 1990–92 period. During that time, the number of enterprises estimated by banks as incapable of repaying interest and principal on time grew more than sevenfold from 548 to 4,448. As shown in table 3, the proportion of nonperforming loans increased from 1991 to 1992. According to NBP bank supervision policy, the loan provision requirements against nonperforming loans (as a fraction of these loans) were 20 percent for substandard, 50 percent for doubtful, and 100 percent for loss. The data in table 3 show that actual provisioning as of the end of 1992 was considerably below what was needed to meet government standards. Clearly, some banks did not have enough capital to reserve fully against their nonperforming loans. Although these firms were insolvent in economic terms, they were allowed to continue operations. In the case of privately owned and operated banks, such a decision would have created a moral hazard incentive to increase risk taking in the hope of regaining solvency. Because the vast

TABLE 3

Nonperforming loans

As a percent of total loans

Category	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995
Substandard	8.4	9.2	7.1	5.7	5.0
Doubtful	4.8	9.2	6.0	5.3	3.4
Loss	2.6	11.6	17.9	17.7	12.8
Total	15.8	30.0	31.0	28.7	21.2

Provision coverage as a percent of required

Category	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995
Substandard	31.6	11.8	16.3	25.8	26.1
Doubtful	16.9	6.6	25.0	55.4	59.5
Loss	26.7	36.8	87.1	100.1	100.2
Total	62.1	33.1	82.6	103.1	103.8

Note: Total loan provision coverage is calculated based on required coverage of 20 percent, 50 percent, and 100 percent for loans classified as substandard, doubtful, and loss, respectively.

Sources: Data for 1991 and 1992 are from the National Bank of Poland. Data for 1993 through 1995 are from OECD (1996).

majority of banking assets was still owned and controlled by the government, the moral hazard incentive could be contained.

The problems confronting Poland's banking industry required action on several fronts. First, the government passed a revised banking law in March 1992, giving the NBP the authority to enforce capital adequacy and loss provisioning standards. The law also set limits on the amount a bank could lend to one borrower; no loan could be for more than 10 percent of capital and total loans to a single borrower could not exceed 15 percent of capital. Second, to address knowledge deficiencies among bank employees and management about modern bank practices, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank funded a program in which a commercial bank from the West would be "twinned" with one of the nine ex-NBP banks. The western bank would send staff to the Polish bank to introduce western banking practices and technology and to train staff. Seven of the nine banks chose to participate and contracts were signed in mid-1992. A similar program was set up to help train bank examiners and provide technical assistance to the NBP to modernize its operations.

Now that it had the legal authority to deal with the banking crisis, the NBP, in cooperation with the Ministry of Finance, began to act. First, international accounting firms were hired in 1992 to conduct an audit of loan portfolios as of the end of 1991. For the nine ex-NBP banks, 9 percent of the best bank's loan portfolio was considered doubtful or lost, while in the worst bank the figure was as high as 60 percent. All nine banks were instructed to establish workout departments, assign to these departments loans classified as doubtful or loss, and take action to recover the loans. In November 1992, the NBP issued an order requiring banks to provision fully against all lending to these customers by the end of 1993 (later extended to March 31, 1994). Finally, an Enterprise and Bank Restructuring Program (EBRP) to address the undercapitalization of the banks and the causes of the bad loan problem went into effect on March 19, 1993.

The EBRP initially applied to seven of the nine ex-NBP banks. (Wielkopolski Bank Kredytowy and Bank Śląski were shown by the 1992 audit not to require restructuring and were privatized in 1993 and 1994, respectively.) The key feature of the EBRP was a one-time recapitalization of the banks, with the size of the capital infusion based on the value of each bank's nonperforming loan portfolio at the end of 1991. The recapitalization, totaling approximately $520 million, would raise each bank's risk-based capital–asset ratio to 12 percent, well above the Basel norm of 8 percent, to ensure adequate capitalization should loan quality deteriorate and to make credible the promise that this would be the last opportunity to recapitalize. To qualify, the banks were required to undergo another credit evaluation by outside auditors, set up workout departments, and take action to resolve all loans classified as nonperforming at the end of 1991. By the end of March 1994, each bank had to show that either 1) a court or bank conciliation agreement had been signed (similar to chapter 11 in the U.S.); 2) the debtor had been fully servicing its debt for at least the previous three months; 3) the debtor had been declared bankrupt; 4) liquidation had been initiated under the Privatization Law (privatization is pending) or under the law on SOEs (the enterprise is being shut down); or 5) the debt had been sold on a secondary market. The law also required that no new loans be made to nonperforming borrowers, which reinforced a guideline put in place by the NBP in 1992.

Gray and Holle (1996) analyzed the effect of the EBRP on creditors and borrowers. They conclude that the program had many benefits. It gave the banks a needed recapitalization and forced them to develop the institutional capability to deal with problem debtors. It required them to resolve these loans through workouts, loan sales, or forced liquidation. Gray and Holle report that larger and/or stronger firms tended to repay their debt or enter bank conciliation, while smaller and/or weaker firms tended to go into bankruptcy or liquidation. However, they also conclude that the program has not achieved the level of borrower restructuring its architects had hoped for. The restructuring agreements that banks signed with borrowers dealt primarily with financial conditions and did not address fundamental management or operational changes. Gray and Holle contend that the system of bankruptcy and, especially, SOE liquidation does not give enough control to creditors of distressed firms. They argue the existing system leads to lenient treatment of borrowers that may delay needed restructuring of SOEs.

Behavior and performance of Polish banks since 1992

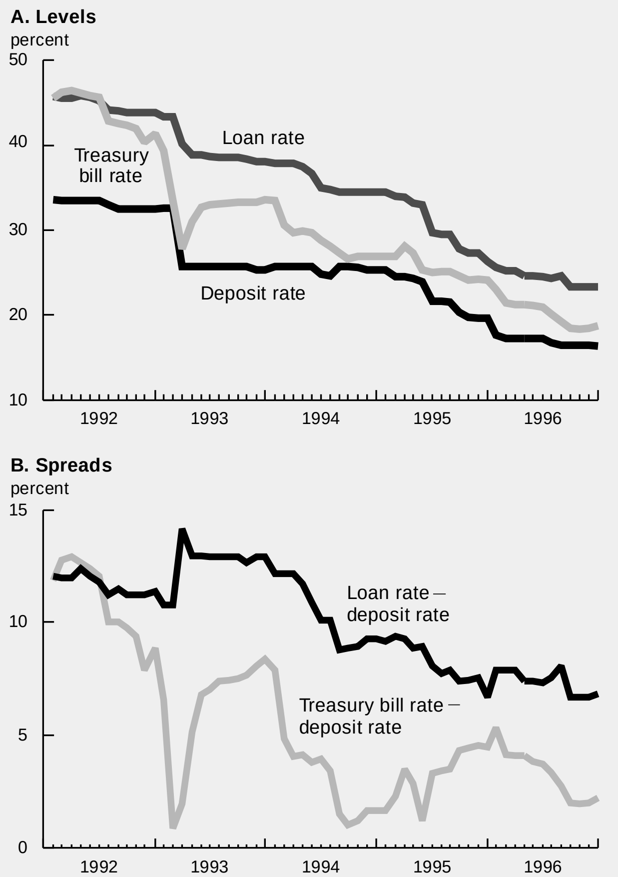
As shown in table 2, the economy recovered strongly from the recession of the early 1990s, with real GDP growth increasing from 3.8 percent in 1993 to 7 percent in 1995 and an estimated 6 percent in 1996. Inflation has continued to fall every year since 1990, reaching 19.9 percent in 1996.

The improving inflation picture has led to a rapid decline in interest rates. Figure 1 illustrates the decline in short-term interest rates since the beginning of 1992. In January 1992, the three-month Treasury bill yield was 45.6 percent. It declined steadily over the next four years to 18.79 percent by December 1996. Deposit and loan rates have also declined, but the spread between Treasury bills and deposit rates of similar maturity has remained positive. The spread between loans and deposits has also remained large, though it has decreased somewhat over the past two years. The large spreads between interest-earning assets and the banks' costs of funds have enabled banks to maintain high net interest margins.

Table 4 presents aggregate balance sheets for selected years from 1992 to 1996, and table 5 shows selected ratios. As shown in table 5, the ratio of capital to total assets declined from 4.8 percent in 1992 to 4.3 percent in September 1996. However, the 1992 figure overstated the true net worth position of the banking system because provisions for loan losses were made for only 33.1 percent of what was legally required. By the end of 1994, according to OECD (1996) data, the coverage ratio had risen to over 100 percent, indicating that reserve levels now appear to be adequate. The capital–asset ratio declined to 3.1 percent in 1995, but due to improved profitability and a 700 million złoty capital infusion into BGŻ, it rose in 1996.

FIGURE 1

Selected three-month interest rates



Source: National Bank of Poland, *Information Bulletins*, various issues.

Table 5 also shows the rapid growth of holdings in government securities. The share of securities in bank portfolios rose from 15.6 percent at the end of 1992 to 30.1 percent at the end of September 1996. There are three reasons for the growth in government securities relative to other asset categories. First, Treasury spreads over deposit rates have been positive, so they have represented a low-risk method to increase net interest income. Second, since Treasury bills and bonds are counted as only 10 percent and 20 percent, respectively, in the calculation of risk-weighted assets, the return per złoty of capital is extremely high, especially adjusted for risk. Moreover, the low level of capital in the Polish banking system implies that banks must hold a significant quantity of government securities to meet the risk-based capital standard of 8 percent of risk-weighted assets. Finally, given the risky commercial lending environment in Poland, it made sense

TABLE 4

Aggregate balance sheet of commercial banks

	1992		1994		1996[a]	
	bil. złoty	% of total assets	bil. złoty	% of total assets	bil. złoty	% of total assets
Assets						
Cash and reserves at NBP	5.85	8.96	8.39	6.94	10.61	5.56
Due from other financial institutions	2.60	3.98	6.06	5.01	11.65	6.11
Due from abroad	10.49	16.07	18.87	15.60	16.97	8.85
Due from general government	2.66	4.08	0.89	0.74	1.68	0.88
Total loans	24.33	37.28	41.54	34.34	70.59	37.01
Corporate	23.14	35.45	38.21	31.59	61.22	32.11
Personal	1.19	1.82	3.32	2.74	9.37	4.91
Securities	10.17	15.58	28.87	23.87	57.46	30.13
Other assets	9.01	13.80	16.35	13.52	21.73	11.39
Total assets	**65.27**	**100.00**	**120.95**	**100.00**	**190.70**	**100.00**
Liabilities						
Foreign liabilities	3.02	4.63	3.76	3.11	6.54	3.43
Due to financial institutions	7.97	12.21	13.86	11.46	21.95	11.51
Due to general government	3.91	5.99	3.69	3.05	8.00	4.19
Złoty deposits of nonfinancial sector	23.06	35.33	42.97	35.53	77.89	40.84
Demand deposits	7.10	10.88	15.18	12.55	1.35	11.20
Savings deposits	0.95	1.46	1.45	1.20	2.37	1.24
Time deposits	15.01	23.00	26.35	21.79	54.16	28.40
Foreign currency deposits of nonfinancial sector	9.08	13.91	22.05	18.23	22.39	11.74
Demand deposits	2.59	3.97	7.52	6.22	8.26	4.33
Time deposits	6.49	9.94	14.53	12.01	14.13	7.41
Other liabilities	14.90	22.83	28.47	23.54	45.71	23.97
Tier 1 capital	3.13	4.80	5.40	4.46	8.22	4.31
Total liabilities and capital	**65.27**	**100.00**	**120.95**	**100.00**	**190.70**	**100.00**

[a]Through September 1996.
Note: Numbers may not total exactly due to rounding.
Source: National Bank of Poland, *Information Bulletins*, various issues.

TABLE 5

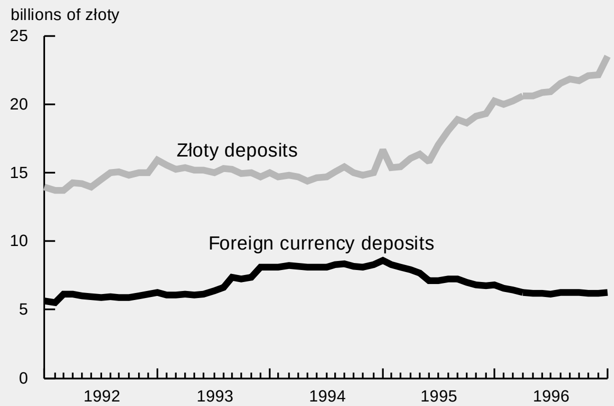
Polish banks: Selected ratios
(percent)

Category	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996[a]
Tier 1 capital/asset ratio	4.8	5.5	4.5	3.1	4.3
Nonperforming loans/total loans	30.0	31.2	28.3	21.5	15.1
Loans/total assets	37.3	36.2	34.3	35.1	37.0
Securities/total assets	15.6	19.9	23.9	27.0	30.1
Demand deposits/total deposits	30.2	31.2	34.9	30.3	29.5
Foreign deposits/ total deposits	28.3	35.0	33.9	25.1	22.3
ROA	2.7	-0.2	-0.0	2.0	2.8
ROE	54.0	-4.6	-0.2	44.9	65.7
Loans/GDP	20.3	19.1	17.7	17.9	22.4

[a]Balance sheet estimates as of September 30, 1996. ROA and ROE through first nine months of 1996.
Source: National Bank of Poland.

FIGURE 2

Złoty deposits versus foreign currency deposits, adjusted for inflation



Note: The deposit levels were deflated by the Consumer Price Index (December 1991 = 1.0).
Source: National Bank of Poland, *Information Bulletins*, various issues.

for banks to invest in safe government securities until they had adequate capital to bear the risks of commercial lending. This behavior is similar to that observed among U.S. commercial banks during the so-called credit crunch from 1989 to 1992. Indicating an improvement in the Polish banking environment, the share of loans to total assets has been increasing since the end of 1994.

The most striking feature on the liability side of the balance sheet is the huge growth in domestic deposits in 1995, up 47.6 percent from the 1994 level. Most of the increase is concentrated in personal time deposits, which rose by 80.6 percent. However, personal demand and savings deposits rose by 95.3 and 41.2 percent, respectively, indicating a growing level of personal savings is finding its way into the banking system. Figure 2 illustrates the growth of inflation-adjusted złoty deposits and foreign currency deposits since the end of 1991. Adjusted for inflation, złoty deposits showed little change from the end of 1991 to early 1995, but have grown significantly since then. The growth has been exclusively in domestic currency deposits. The re-denomination of the złoty in January 1995 presumably increased public confidence in holding domestic currency deposits, while the decline in the value of the dollar in the first half of 1995 made foreign currency deposits less attractive to Polish savers. The introduction of formal deposit insurance in Poland, effective February 1995, may also have contributed to the growth in domestic deposits.[4] Despite this rapid deposit growth, banking services are underutilized relative to other countries. For example, OECD (1996) reports that only 10 percent of the population have a bank account and cash is by far the most common means of payment in Poland.

As these data illustrate, the period from 1992 to the present has been an opportunity for the banking system to recapitalize and increase its reserves against nonperforming loans. Polish banks have held a high proportion of government securities, a policy that continues to be very profitable on a return-on-equity basis. As shown in table 6, Polish banks are still undercapitalized relative to the U.S. and the UK. Although their capitalization appears comparable to that of German banks, German banks have equity holdings on their balance sheet that are booked below their market value. Until very recently, the need to maintain large holdings of government securities to boost profits, improve capital

TABLE 6

Country comparisons of selected banking ratios for 1995
(percent)

Country	Capital/ assets	Securities/ assets	Loans/ assets	ROA
United States	8.1	18.8	60.4	1.13
United Kingdom	4.8	16.1	50.0	0.84
Germany	3.0	16.4	56.6	0.24
Czech Republic	3.5	16.2	35.0	0.19
Poland	3.1	27.0	35.1	2.00

Notes: Data for the U.S., the Czech Republic, and Poland are for the entire banking system. Data for Germany are based on a summation of data for Bayerische Vereinsbank, Commerzbank, Deutsche Bank, Dresdner Bank, BHF Bank, and Hypobank. Data for the UK are based on a summation of data for Barclays, HSBC, Lloyds, Midland, Nat West, and Standard Chartered Banks.
Sources: U.S. data are from the FDIC, *Statistics on Banking*. German, UK, and Czech banking data are from *BankWatch*. Polish data are from the National Bank of Poland.

adequacy, and remain above risk-based capital levels has constrained Polish banks from increasing their commercial lending activity.

The undercapitalization of the banking system and its effect on the balance sheet can be seen in the performance of the largest state-owned banks (see table 7 for selected ratios by bank group). The top four banks, PKO BP, Pekao SA, BGŻ, and Bank Handlowy, hold over 40 percent of banking system assets. This group has the lowest leverage ratio, the highest concentration of securities to assets, and the lowest ratio of loans to assets of any group of Polish banks in the last two years. The data in table 7 also indicate that these four banks have the lowest risk-based ratios of any Polish bank group from 1993 to 1996. Their combined capital ratio rose in 1996 due to higher bank profits and the partial recapitalization of BGŻ. The remaining groups' capital ratios dropped in 1996 due to a surge in loans made by banks. (See appendix on PKO BP and BGŻ and section on consolidation below for more details on the undercapitalization of these banks. Bank Handlowy is well-capitalized and profitable.)

TABLE 7

Selected ratios by bank group

	1993	1994	1995	1996 (Oct)
Top four banks				
% of system assets	45.4	45.0	43.8	42.7
Leverage ratio[a]	5.1	4.4	1.6	3.0
Risk-based capital ratio	3.5	6.7	5.3	9.0[b]
Securities/assets	20.5	27.0	33.2	38.0
Loans/assets	34.5	31.6	30.0	29.8
Remaining state-owned banks				
% of system assets	22.9	23.3	17.2	15.6
Leverage ratio	6.2	5.0	5.0	5.1
Risk-based capital ratio	22.5	21.4	20.1	16.9[b]
Securities/assets	22.1	22.2	23.4	22.4
Loans/assets	39.5	37.0	40.3	47.2
Domestic private banks[c]				
% of system assets	29.3	28.6	35.0	36.6
Leverage ratio	3.7	2.4	2.7	3.2
Risk-based capital ratio	9.8	13.5	14.9	14.5[b]
Securities/assets	18.0	21.3	22.1	21.2
Loans/assets	36.7	36.2	38.3	33.1
Foreign banks				
% of system assets	2.4	3.1	4.0	5.1
Leverage ratio	10.0	10.7	13.4	15.4
Risk-based capital ratio	10.0	12.3	21.7	18.9[b]
Securities/assets	8.9	14.3	19.3	15.1
Loans/assets	31.3	37.4	41.0	42.5

[a]Leverage ratios are computed with Tier 1 plus Tier 2 capital.

[b]September 1996.

[c]These include banks owned by local governments and state-owned enterprises as well as banks held in receivership by the NBP.

Source: Computed from data obtained from the National Bank of Poland.

Challenges: The role of foreign banks, privatization, and consolidation

The role of foreign banks, the timetable and extent of Polish bank privatization, and the issue of consolidation are intricately intertwined. These issues are also closely linked to the capital adequacy, profitability, and efficiency of Polish banks.

Foreign banks

In the initial stages of Poland's economic transition, the government had encouraged the entry of foreign banks to the market. In the liberal licensing environment of the early 1990s, the government tried to promote private banks that would compete with the large state-owned banks that were planned for quick privatization. The Ministry of Finance sought strategic investors and encouraged foreign participation through the twinning program (which was implemented with the idea that foreign participating banks would be allowed to hold a stake in their Polish twin).

The privatization of most state-owned banks has been delayed, however, due to systemic problems related to the lack of prudential regulation and supervision, bad loan problems, and undercapitalization. Consequently, the entry of foreign banks into Poland has also been delayed. Currently, foreign banks are limited to purchasing shares in existing Polish banks or to outright purchase and recapitalization of failing banks. As of the end of September 1996, they held 5.1 percent of total bank assets in Poland and 5.6 percent of total loans. The NBP has maintained a policy of quickly resolving troubled banks through liquidation or merger, regardless of the origin of the potential buyer. Thus, foreign banks have been allowed to enter the market if they could aid in restructuring Polish banks.

Only recently has the Ministry of Finance agreed to allow foreign banks to control the majority of equity in a large bank. For example, the ministry agreed last summer to sell the remainder of its stake in Bank Śląski to ING (Netherlands), raising its stake to 51 percent. This change in policy toward foreign ownership of banks may have been influenced by Poland's entry to the OECD in the summer of 1996 and the continuing negotiations over its proposed entry to the European Union. Nevertheless, the government has postponed opening the banking sector to full foreign entry from 1997 to 1999. At that time, foreign banks will be able to establish a branch merely through registration.

Since foreign banks are well capitalized, well managed, and highly profitable, they are seen as a threat to the inadequately capitalized and relatively less skilled Polish banks. To date, foreign banks in Poland have concentrated in commercial loans, trade finance, cash management, and other fee-based activities, but their territory is expanding. For example, Citicorp started accepting deposits from households in January 1997, while Hypobank (Germany) is interested in developing consumer and mortgage lending operations. Several foreign banks have applied for licenses to operate in Poland. On the positive side, foreign banks bring in capital that can help the banking system expand to meet the needs of Poland's growing economy. Furthermore, competition from foreign banks will induce Polish banks to become more efficient and offer their customers better service.

Privatization

Of the original nine banks spun off from the NBP, four have been successfully privatized, WBK of Poznań (1993), Bank Śląski (1994), BPH of Kraków (1995), and Bank Gdański (1995), although Bank Śląski and BPH subsequently received capital infusions through foreign participation. Powszechny Bank Kredytowy of Warsaw is tentatively scheduled for privatization in 1997 and Bank Zachodni of Wrocław in 1998. The remaining three banks have been consolidated with Pekao SA into a holding company that is due to be privatized in 1998. In addition, Bank Handlowy will be privatized later this year.

Originally, the nine regional banks were scheduled to be privatized by the end of 1996, but the government decided to delay their privatization. Thus, seven years into Poland's economic transition, 54 percent of total capital in the banking industry was still held by the state (OECD, 1996). There are arguments for and against quick privatization. Proponents of quick privatization argue that the discipline of the market will foster more efficient financial institutions. Private shareholders have a greater incentive to implement cost reductions and expansion of profitable financial services than state-owned institutions. On the other hand, the presence of de facto government guarantees on bank liabilities exacerbates the moral hazard incentive to increase risk taking. Given that many of the state-owned banks are still inadequately capitalized, the government can contain the potential moral hazard problem associated with undercapitalized banks. In view of the danger of allowing poorly capitalized banks to operate with little regulatory oversight, the Polish government could have justification for not following the original privatization schedule for all banks.

The 1994 EBRP recapitalization and the improved profitability of the industry as a whole have allowed banks to increase reserves against potential losses and to build their capital positions. As a result, the case for privatization grows stronger every day. Well-capitalized state-owned banks should be privatized as soon as possible, because the discipline of private ownership and management will induce them to operate more efficiently than they would under public control. Nevertheless, after seven years of government protection, many banks, including some of the largest banks (see appendix), remain undercapitalized and unable to compete effectively with foreign banks. These banks may need to remain in government hands for a longer time to contain the moral hazard problem. However, the policy goal of eventually privatizing these banks as well keeps pressure on them to continue modernizing operations, rebuilding capital, and improving customer service. In the absence of genuine private ownership, such pressure is needed to improve their ability to compete.

Consolidation

The privatization of the remaining state-owned banks has been put into limbo by the government's bank consolidation plans. In late 1994, the Ministry of Finance announced plans to consolidate two groups of banks, one around Pekao SA and the other around Bank Handlowy. The Bank Handlowy consolidation was opposed by BPH (Kraków), one of the banks to be included in the merger, and by the Fund for the Privatization of Polish Banks, which controls foreign donations that have been used to recapitalize the banking system. As a result, the Bank Handlowy consolidation was abandoned and BH will be privatized by itself later this year. However, in September 1996, an agreement was signed officially joining Pekao SA with three of the original nine NBP banks: BDK (Lublin), PBG (Łódź), and PBKS (Szczecin). A full merger of their operations will be worked out over the next year.

The case for consolidation is based partly on the belief that Polish banks lack the size and capital to compete with foreign banks in the loan market and that foreign banks will be able to offer more favorable lending terms to creditworthy Polish firms. Thus, the quality of the loan portfolios at Polish banks will gradually deteriorate, potentially increasing the risk of failure. There are two main arguments in favor of consolidation: 1) the ability of a large bank to make larger loans, given the constraint on lending no more than 15 percent of a bank's capital to any one borrower; and 2) the cost savings of consolidation before privatization. Some argue that loans made by a consolidated bank would have substantially lower transactions costs than loans made through a lending consortium (Wyczański and Gołajewska, 1996). Moreover, some research suggests that the cost per złoty of assets of privatizing a consolidated bank would be lower than the cost of privatizing a group of banks and then allowing them to merge (Bonin and Leven, 1996).

Proponents of privatizing banks before consolidating them argue that banks' management can choose how best to consolidate. Private banks deciding to consolidate would have an incentive to improve efficiency to increase their value at the time of the merger. Proponents also contend that with private firms, the decision to consolidate is more likely to be made on strict economic grounds, allowing for antitrust considerations, than if these firms were consolidated first by the government.

In the banking literature, the main arguments for mergers are efficiency gains (through economies of scale and scope) and risk reduction (through a diversified asset portfolio). However, research evidence shows that most mergers do not, on average, decrease cost ratios (total expenses to assets and noninterest expenses to assets). Studies that take into account the cost effects of changes in output mix generally come to the same conclusion. (Laderman, 1995). We only have indirect evidence on whether, in general, bank mergers reduce risk. Boyd and Graham (1991) found that between 1971 and 1988, U.S. banks with $1 billion or more in assets failed at roughly twice the rate of banks with less than $1 billion. This failure rate, however, could have been due to lower capital ratios rather than operating risk.

It is not clear that the banks which are consolidated to form Group Pekao will enjoy economies of scale or scope. Although the decision to merge Pekao SA and three other banks has been finalized, the details of any projected cost savings have not been worked out. It could be argued that this merger will produce a more extensive branch network and a more geographically and industrially diversified loan portfolio. Currently, there are big disparities in regional growth and some banks are heavily concentrated in certain types of loans, so there may be some advantages to such diversification.

On the other hand, since this consolidation is being arranged by the Ministry of Finance and not by direct negotiation among the banks, the merger of the Pekao SA group has produced tensions among the banks involved. These tensions, which may reflect different organizational structures, goals, and corporate cultures, may produce problems that could raise the cost of consolidation. For example, the smaller banks have expressed concern about losing autonomy. Before the merger, Pekao SA planned to centralize operations like distribution, credit and debit card management, the ATM network, brokerage offices, and international payments. This would relegate the other banks in the group to gathering deposits and making limited loans. The mayor of Łódź has argued that the merger would inhibit regional development by limiting PBG's ability to make local loan and deposit decisions. The smaller banks have proposed a more decentralized organizational structure, akin to a multibank holding company in the

U.S., which would reduce the potential economies of scale from the merger. Even if this issue can be resolved in a manner that leads to a more efficient bank, the four banks together do not have enough capital to build a strong banking organization. To be viable in the long run, the consolidated bank will need an infusion of new capital. At the present time, it is difficult to see where such capital will be found.

The issue of whether to privatize first or consolidate first is not clear. What is clear is that if there is insufficient capital, consolidation only yields a larger institution with insufficient capital. This may exacerbate the moral hazard incentive because the government would be more likely to fully guarantee the liabilities of a large bank than a small bank in the event of a failure. A large bank therefore has a greater incentive to take risks. In our view, until a solution is found that increases the overall capital of the combined group of banks, the proposed consolidation of Pekao SA should not go forward.

Conclusion

Since 1989, Poland has been engaged in a process of economic transformation on several fronts. With respect to bank reform, the overall performance has been mixed. On the positive side, Polish banks have used the latest technology to modernize their operations and have enhanced the knowledge base of their staff through training. They have improved their ability to evaluate creditworthiness and, out of necessity, have developed departments to resolve problem loans to financially distressed borrowers. In general, Polish banks appear to be profitable, and capital adequacy is gradually improving. On the negative side, they have not yet proven successful in effecting changes in corporate governance that would successfully restructure firms with nonperforming loans. In addition, the large state-owned banks, PKO BP and BGŻ, continue to pose problems for the government and the banking system. Their size, undercapitalization, state protection, and slow institutional change have impeded the overall development of the industry.

As Poland looks toward the year 2000, it aims to become more integrated into the West by joining both NATO and the European Union. Reform of the banking system is necessary for this integration to occur. However, reform is inhibited both by a deep distrust of foreigners, partly because several foreign powers have at one time or another controlled its territory, and by a reluctance of entrenched management at state-owned banks to make necessary changes or concede power. What is happening in the banking industry reflects these conflicting attitudes. The government knows that the country would benefit from western experience and capital, but it also wants its banking system to be dominated by Polish-owned and -operated banks. Consolidation of banks has been proposed as a way of building institutions large enough to compete with multinational banking organizations such as Citicorp or Deutsche Bank. In the final analysis, however, capital adequacy is more important than size. With adequate capital, a bank can pursue profit opportunities, take intelligent risks, or expand operations. Without adequate capital, a bank's growth is constrained, it is limited to holding less risky securities instead of potentially more profitable loans, and it has a hard time making needed investments that can enhance its efficiency. The main problem facing Polish banks today is not that they are too small but that they do not have enough capital. Solving the capital problem will enable Poland to build a strong banking industry with or without foreign participation. In order to recapitalize the banks using domestic funds only, the government would have to divert resources from other areas of need. Given current budgetary difficulties, this does not seem feasible. Thus, utilizing foreign sources of capital seems to be a necessary ingredient in achieving the goal of an efficient and sound banking system.

APPENDIX: Big banks, big problems: PKO BP and BGŻ

As of September 1996, PKO BP (State Savings Bank) and BGŻ (Bank for Food Economy) together held 28.6 percent of the total assets of the Polish banking system. Their combined capital was less than 2 percent of assets. Clearly, PKO BP and BGŻ are not the only problem banks in Poland. However, due to their slow restructuring, large capital needs, and sizable nonperforming loan portfolios relative to capitalization, these banks are likely to remain a drain on the government budget and an impediment to the development of a sound banking system for years to come.

PKO BP

PKO BP was established in 1919 as the Post Office Savings Bank, taking its present name in 1950. It was consolidated with the NBP in the mid-1970s and was separated from the NBP in 1988. PKO BP is the largest bank in Poland, with over 1,000 branches and outlets controlling approximately 21 percent of total banking system assets and 26 percent of total deposits as of September 1996. Before 1990, PKO BP's assets consisted mainly of state residential construction loans. Currently, the bank has a high concentration of securities (39 percent of total assets) and a low concentration of loans (28.6 percent of total assets) with new lending primarily going to finance private residential construction. Net earnings for 1996 were 985 million złoty, compared with 345 million złoty in 1995.

The bank is burdened with a large proportion of nonperforming housing loans inherited from the Communist era. At the end of 1993, 84 percent of its loans were housing related and 93 percent of these were made before 1990. By the end of 1994, 16 percent of PKO BP's loans were classified as nonperforming and provisions against these losses were only 37.2 percent of what was required. These loans were mainly given to the 500 largest building cooperatives that constructed and managed low-cost housing. Over the last six years, these cooperatives have been repaying only 20 percent to 30 percent of the interest due to PKO BP. The remaining interest has been capitalized and added to the loan amounts.

Due to the forced capitalization of interest, the Ministry of Finance purchased 2.9 billion złoty of capitalized interest from 1990 to 1992 to maintain PKO BP's liquidity (OECD, 1996). In 1993, the bank received 573.4 million złoty ($272 million) in restructuring bonds as a result of the EBRP. The bad loan problem persists. Although the housing cooperatives are still legally liable for their debts, the bank has not pursued collection. In addition, PKO BP operates inefficiently. For example, the bank's employee–asset ratio of 5.1 per million złoty of assets as of the end of 1994 is more than twice as high as that of any other state-owned bank in Poland.

Although PKO BP's recent earnings performance has been very good, its future remains uncertain. The government will conduct a diagnostic study later this year and it already has plans to convert PKO BP into a joint stock company owned by the Ministry of Finance in 1998. The joint stock company could then be restructured for privatization, but the process is likely to take several years. The government has decided that PKO BP should be controlled by Polish capital, but the source of this capital is unknown. Several options are being discussed, including issuing shares to deposit holders, selling some shares to state pension funds that have yet to be created, and/or selling shares to local governments. Delaying privatization should not affect Poland's entry into the EU, since PKO BP (and BGŻ) will be exempt from EU regulations.

BGŻ

BGŻ was started in 1919 as the State Agricultural Bank and took its current form in 1975 when the Agricultural Bank merged with the Central Association of Credit and Savings Cooperatives. The bank performed financial and coordinating services for nearly 1,600 farm cooperative banks. At the end of 1994, these cooperatives held only 8 percent of the loans in the banking system but served about one-third of the rural population. The bank's internal decisionmaking structure is influenced by the Peasant Party (PSL), which is heavily supported by Polish farmers and agricultural interests.

The cooperative banks were originally required to affiliate with BGŻ, which, in turn, provided the coops with refinancing credit, clearing facilities, and a depository for surplus liquidity. BGŻ functioned as a conduit for direct and subsidized funds from the state to farmers, either directly or through the cooperatives. In an effort to reduce BGŻ's central control and give more authority to the cooperative banks, the government passed the Cooperative Law of 1990. BGŻ was legally separated from the cooperatives. Although BGŻ then formed agreements with 1,270 of the cooperatives to continue their previous relationship, approximately 400 cooperatives became independent of BGŻ. Neither BGŻ nor any other supervisory authority was given responsibility for overseeing these cooperatives. Not surprisingly, many of these unsupervised cooperatives increased their risk exposure by making irresponsible loans and guaranteeing loans. The number of troubled or insolvent cooperatives grew rapidly in 1993 and 1994. By 1994, the activities of 43 cooperative banks were suspended. More than 200 cooperatives were insolvent at the end of 1995.

The cooperatives were not the only source of BGŻ's problems. Although it inherited many of its problem loans from the 1980s, difficult conditions for European agriculture in general and the drought of 1992 in particular have also contributed to its bad loan problem. BGŻ's loan portfolio, comprising about one-half of its assets, is mainly concentrated in food processing, agriculture, and food cooperatives. In 1992, about 24 percent of problem loans were from the food processing sector, which accounts for 40 percent of the bank's loan portfolio. By the end of 1995, BGŻ's share of nonperforming loans stood at 59 percent of total loans. The separation of BGŻ from some of its cooperatives, the lack of supervision, and the absence of a restructuring plan led to irresponsible practices. To correct these problems, the government required BGŻ to convert into a state-owned corporation by the end of 1992 as a precondition for recapitalization in 1993. BGŻ did not comply, in part because compliance would have limited the PSL's control over the bank's board of directors. With the PSL representing the swing vote in Parliament, BGŻ was able to secure a capital infusion via recapitalization bonds of 4.3 billion złoty. As a condition for BGŻ receiving

1.6 billion złoty in recapitalization bonds in 1994, the Restructuring Act of June 24, 1994 was passed.

The law creates 11 regional banks to improve supervision of the cooperatives. The majority of BGŻ's branches will be transferred to the regional banks and all state shares will eventually be sold to these banks. BGŻ will function as a holding company, controlling and coordinating the activities of the regional banks and performing all parent company functions for the cooperative units, including international business. State influence will continue under the new structure.

To date, the restructuring has gone slowly. Only three of the 11 regional banks have been created and BGŻ continues to have problems. In 1996, the bank was given an additional capital infusion of 700 million złoty ($260 million). A true assessment of BGŻ's problems is hampered by politics and a lack of financial transparency. BGŻ continues to receive direct subsidies from the government and to offer below market rate loans. Likewise, BGŻ controls the loan and deposit interest rates of the cooperatives. In addition, BGŻ's deposits are fully covered by the Bank Guarantee Fund and the Ministry of Finance.

The restructuring of BGŻ will continue through the year 2000 and there are no plans to privatize the bank or remove its state guarantees before 2002. Without additional capital or huge earnings, it is difficult to see how BGŻ will reach its target 6 percent solvency ratio by 1999 (or the 8 percent needed for privatization). Recently, Crédit Agricole (France's largest cooperative bank) entered into a twinning agreement with BGŻ. BGŻ is also trying to form joint ventures with RUS (the pension fund for farmers) and Allianz AG of Germany (the largest insurance company in Europe). The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development is considering taking a 10 percent to 20 percent stake in BGŻ and making the bank a large loan. Foreign participation in BGŻ may be its only hope for restructuring, recapitalization, and privatization.

NOTES

[1]See Ugolini (1996) for an excellent discussion of the reorganization of the National Bank of Poland.

[2]The złoty was re-denominated at the beginning of 1995 with one new złoty equal to 10,000 old złoty. To avoid confusion, all figures in the article have been recalculated using new złoty.

[3]The Balcerowicz Plan was named for Leszek Balcerowicz, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance in the first non-Communist Polish government. For a detailed discussion of the plan and its economic effects, see Slay (1994).

[4]Prior to the introduction of formal deposit insurance, the Polish government did offer deposit guarantees. Deposits at banks in existence at the beginning of 1989 were always guaranteed. Later, the NBP declared that household deposits up to 2,000 ECU would be fully guaranteed and deposits between 2,000 ECU and 3,000 ECU would be partially guaranteed.

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