

## **Configuring Organisational Resources and Coordinating Business Operations in the Practice of Polish MNEs: Towards Excellence in International Management?**

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### **Abstract**

The starting point for discussion in the paper is the belief that being present on international markets offers only an opportunity, not a guarantee, of benefiting from internationalisation, in particular in relation to the most advanced transaction “Ot” advantages (according to the OLI paradigm). Thus, the following paper focuses on two main aspects of international management, i.e. the spatial configuration of organisational resources and the coordination of business operations, which both largely condition benefits from multinationality. The main purpose of this study is to assess the degree of resource configuration and activity coordination among MNEs representing the so-called latecomers in the global economy (in this case MNEs from Poland). In order to achieve this goal, we use firm-level data obtained from a survey conducted among Polish MNEs and their foreign affiliates. Our findings indicate that resource configuration and activity coordination are limited among the surveyed enterprises (they remain at a medium level). Although Polish MNEs report benefits from undertaking international activities, the majority of them are not yet able to maximise the results at the current stage of their development.

**Keywords:** Multinational enterprises, MNEs, Organisational resources, Business operations, Configuration, Coordination, International management, Latecomers in the global economy, FDI

### **Introduction**

Internationalisation of enterprises is guided by various reasons (Jaworek et al. 2019: 2–9). However, looking at the motives driving foreign expansion, it can be considered in its four basic variants, i.e. as (Dunning 1998: 53; 1993: 56; 2000: 164–165): resource-oriented, market-oriented, efficiency-oriented, and strategic asset or capability-oriented. It must be stressed – as Dunning and Lundan (2008b: 68) point out – that many multinational enterprises (MNEs), especially the larger ones, frequently pursue multiple objectives when engaging in foreign expansion that combines more than one of the above categories. According to the eclectic theory of international production (the OLI paradigm), meeting these objectives will be possible mainly thanks to the appropriate use of the so-called specific ownership (or proprietary) “O” advantages, i.e. unique firm-specific assets, both tangible and (largely) intangible, which are not available or not available at such favourable terms, to other enterprises (Dunning 1993: 80; Markusen 1995: 174–175; Rugman 2010: 2).

The concept of “O” advantages has changed over time (Eden: 280–291; Eden and Dai 2010: 13–34), starting with the most traditional view (Dunning 1981: 27), through approaches that integrate different perspectives – including new forms of international business (Dunning 1995: 461–491), strategic management theory (Dunning 1998: 13) or institutional theory (Dunning and Lundan 2008a: 573–593; 2010: 1225–1246), to the least obvious ones which focus on the specifics of emerging market multinationals (Antalóczy et al. 2014: 47–61; Williamson and Wan 2018: 557–567). From the point of view of the internationalisation process logics and the consequences for international management, the identification of the asset “Oa” advantages and transaction “Ot” advantages was one of the more important approaches (Dunning 1983: 333–351) (later also institutional “Oi” advantages – Dunning and Lundan 2008a: 573–593; 2010: 1225–1246; Lundan 2010: 51–70). The first group of advantages relates to the protected ownership of specific enterprise assets in relation to the advantages held by other entities and are a consequence of structural market imperfections – they are mainly initial advantages that enable foreign expansion (Dunning 2001: 176). The second group

of advantages is a consequence of the hierarchical organisation of MNEs, which have the ability to generate transaction benefits (or reduce transaction costs) by managing assets located in different countries (Dunning 1988: 2). However, the most advanced “Ot” advantages are uniquely related to multinationality (Eden and Dai 2010: 17). Thus, they can become an attribute of enterprises with a higher level of internationalisation and relate to a situation in which MNEs are able to take advantage of “multiple sources of external authority and multiple denominations of value” (Sundaram and Black 1992: 729) or – in other words – discount benefits of international scale of operation and functioning in diverse socio-economic environments. At this stage, there is a possibility and legitimacy of targeting the expansion of MNEs not only on the previously mentioned acquiring resources (resource-oriented expansion) or gaining access to new markets (market-oriented expansion), but also using “foreign activities as means by which they can improve their global market position by raising their efficiency or accessing new sources of competitive advantage” (Dunning and Lundan 2008b: 68). In reality, however, it is neither simple nor obvious. It is essentially a challenge for managers rather than an absolute benefit of business activity internationalisation.

### **Guidelines and Literature Review**

Although many studies highlight major benefits of foreign expansion (in terms of improving MNE performance, employment parameters, export, investment activities, productivity and overall competitiveness – UNCTAD 2006: 170–175; Sunesen et al. 2010: 31–34; Szałucka 2010: 5–13; Imbriani et al. 2011: 369–381; Gibb and Szałucka 2012: 49–80; Shiau et al. 2013: 184–196; Chen and Yang 2013: 17–38; Foster-McGregor et al. 2014: 244–257; Jaworek et al. 2018b: 137–152), Gupta and Govindarajan (2001: 45–58) state explicitly that being present on international markets, or even becoming a “global player”, merely creates an opportunity to gain a competitive advantage. This opportunity can be used as long as MNEs are able to effectively discount benefits within the five key areas – potential sources of value creation, i.e. adjusting their offer to the specifics of local markets, using transnational scale and scope of activity, optimising spatial configuration of resources and implemented business processes as well as maximising knowledge transfer between units in different locations. In this sense, the internationalisation of an enterprise becomes a necessary condition, but not always sufficient for the full implementation of the objectives related to foreign expansion (Kuzel 2018: 387). It is worth noting that the lack of an absolutely positive relationship between the expansion and the results achieved by MNEs is highlighted by the results of the research conducted among enterprises representing the new European Union member states (Damijan and Decramer 2014: 1–49; Damijan et al. 2017: 74–97).

Looking at the possibility of gaining the most advanced “Ot” advantages by MNEs, the most important aspects are the ability to integrate dispersed resource management and the effectiveness of actions in order to optimise their spatial configuration (including relocation and reconfiguration) and the coordination of business operations (activity coordination) towards increasing global organisational efficiency. In literature, these two basic elements of international management (i.e. configuration and coordination) are most often considered from the perspective of value chains, understood by Porter (1985: 36–39) as a systematic set of activities of strategic importance related to project creation, the production process, marketing activities, deliveries and service. The expansion and spatial distribution of individual elements of the value chain and the entities participating in it describes the configuration, and the integration and harmonisation of activities at the transnational level make up the effect of coordination (Zorska 2007: 161–162). The condition for obtaining benefits from the spatial configuration is the location of the individual elements of the value chain in those locations where they bring the highest value added, while the results of international coordination depend on the appropriate shaping of the network of connections, cooperation and arrangements between enterprise units and its partners in different countries (Koźmiński 1999: 68, 76).

The above approach is fully described by Grunwald and Flamm (1985) and later on developed in the context of international business (Buckley 2004: 1–25; Buckley and Ghauri 2004: 88–89) in the concept of “global factory”. According to it, modern MNEs are increasingly pursuing the postulate of hybridisation of various forms of foreign expansion, conducting flexible activity based on a network

of geographically dispersed units, related by capital relations and cooperation ties, but above all a bundle of goals whose implementation is coordinated by a central entity – a network integrator (usually represented by the parent company). Buckley (2011: 270) emphasises that MNE managers have already learned to a large extent how to decompose processes to optimise the location of their individual stages, as well as how to properly coordinate the entire course of the value chain, even if its individual phases are not implemented “inside” the company. Such activities – as indicated by the analyses (Rosińska-Bukowska 2016: 112–115; 2017: 323–326) – reveal mainly among the most powerful MNEs in the world. At the same time, however, it is clearly emphasised that their experiences are not obvious at all (Yamin 2011: 285–293). Moreover, the intensity of these processes may differ significantly in individual cases, also due to the degree of enterprise internationalisation, the specific nature of particular sectors, socio-economic, cultural or political conditions (Kuzel 2018: 439), as well as the consistency of previously adopted modes of action, experience gained or even historical considerations (Buckley 2009: 309–321; Fitzgerald and Rowley 2015: 449–456).

From the considerations carried out so far emerges a potentially interesting research question: *To what extent is the postulate of spatial configuration of resources and activity coordination implemented by MNEs from the group of the so-called latecomers in the global economy* (i.e. representing countries already partially advanced on their way to win the “developed” status – Storper et al. 1998: 1–9), *in this case by enterprises from Poland?*

Before attempting an answer to this question, however, the specifics of foreign expansion of Polish MNEs need to be outlined briefly. First of all, their expansion has a relatively high growth rate. According to the last World Investment Report (UNCTAD 2019: 216), by the end of 2018, Polish outward foreign direct investment (OFDI) reached the value of \$28,510 million, which is over 106 times more than at the end of 2000 (\$268 million, nominal values). At the same time, the number of companies holding their shares/stakes in 3941 entities abroad was estimated at 1838 in 2017, which means an increase of over 27% compared to 2010 (Statistics Poland 2019). Secondly, despite an intensive growth in OFDI stocks, it must be emphasised that Polish MNEs concentrate mostly on European markets (NBP 2018; Statistics Poland 2019), and the level of their internationalisation (taking into account both the scale and the scope of their activities) is generally at a medium level (Jarosiński 2013: 173–179; Trapczyński 2016: 283–306). Thirdly, the internationalisation of Polish enterprises is primarily market-oriented (Götz 2011: 47–70; Gorynia et al. 2013: 61–75; Kowalewski and Radło 2014: 365–374; Ciesielska et al. 2016: 80–81; Jaworek et al. 2018a: 19–30), their relationships with external entities remain limited (Sagan 2015: 249–258; Adamczyk and Sagan 2015: 38–53; Poland, Go Global! 2015), and expansion is carried out using mainly their own resources (Poland, Go Global! 2015).

Given the above characteristics of the internationalisation of Polish MNEs, below considerations were placed within the basic structure of the links between a parent enterprise and its foreign affiliates, i.e. ignoring their external relationships. This is consistent with an approach presented in the literature (Yaprak et al. 2011: 179–192; Sinkovics et al. 2011: 124), according to which the fundamental conditions for a successful integration and coordination of MNE business processes are within the ability to properly shape the architecture of intra-organisational relationships (i.e. between entities located in different countries, but tied by ownership relations).

## Research Methodology

The results presented in this paper come from a survey conducted among Polish MNEs (the first part) and their foreign affiliates (the second part) as part of the project called “Investment Activity of Polish Enterprises Abroad: Factors and Effects”, conducted between 2010 and 2013 at Nicolaus Copernicus University, Poland as Research Grant No. N N112 322 338, financed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education. The first part of the study covered 622 companies – Polish foreign direct investors. The research was carried out using the CAPI (Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing) method. A total of 64 valid answers were obtained, which means a return of 10.3%. The respondents were mainly representatives of senior and top management. It must be stressed that companies that participated in this part of the study had completed 278 OFDI projects. Among them,

52% were M&A projects and 48% greenfield investment. The majority of completed OFDI projects (44%) were associated with commercial activities and another 37% with services, 11% with production and trade, 4% with production only, 2% with trade and services, and 2% with production, trade and services. The lion's share of OFDI projects (97%) was located in Europe, particularly within the European Union (45% in the EU-15, and 22% in the EU-12).

All foreign affiliates of Polish MNEs identified in the preparatory proceedings were invited to participate in the second part of the study (a postal survey). There were a total of 659. Fifty correctly completed questionnaires were received, which means a return of 7.6%. Most foreign affiliates surveyed were located in countries directly bordering Poland, mainly in the Czech Republic (24%), Ukraine (16%), Russia (10%) and Germany (8%). The activities of foreign affiliates focused mainly on trade (36% of enterprises), services (32%) and production (18%).

## Research Results

The results of the survey confirm that the two elements of international management discussed in the paper (i.e. configuration and coordination) were reflected in the practice of Polish MNEs (Table 1). An appropriate configuration of organisational resources was confirmed in 92% enterprises and the coordination of business operations in 96% of the surveyed enterprises. It should be emphasised, however, that the level of both resource configuration and activity coordination proved to be rather limited.

**Table 1: The configuration of organisational resources and the activity coordination among the surveyed enterprises – assessment of foreign affiliates (the second part of the survey)**

The level of organisational resource configuration / activity coordination:	Resource configuration	Activity coordination
high (%)	14.0	24.0
medium (%)	58.0	50.0
low (%)	20.0	22.0
Lack of proper configuration / coordination (%)	6.0	2.0
Prefer not to say (%)	2.0	2.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

*Source: own study based on survey results.*

A vast majority (63%) of entities that declared having an appropriate spatial configuration of organisational resources, described its level as “medium”, while 21.7% of them considered it “low” and only 15.2% said it was “high”. Similarly, the majority of enterprises (52.1%) assessed their activity coordination to be at a “medium” level. 25% described their scale of coordination as “high” and 22.9% declared that it was “low”. Therefore, despite a significant amount of activity among the surveyed enterprises in both analysed areas, the assessment of its effects remains only moderately positive.

It is not so much the concentration of efforts aimed at obtaining an appropriate spatial configuration of resources or activity coordination that is of most importance for a more complete evaluation of the degree of management integration at the transnational level, but a combination of both these elements. Only together, they can form the foundations for a desired architecture of a company's internal system. Taking into account the above postulate, a summary of the study results seems to confirm the previously formulated conclusion about the limited (medium) level of resource configuration and activity coordination among the surveyed Polish enterprises (Table 2). The results of the study revealed that relatively the highest percentage of enterprises surveyed (13.8%) showed a “medium” level of both spatial resources configuration and activity coordination. On the other hand, a slightly smaller proportion of entities declared “medium” configuration and “high” coordination

levels (10.5%) or “medium” configuration and “low” coordination levels (10.2%). The results of the study indicate that a “medium” or higher level of both resource configuration and activity coordination was declared by 37.3% of the surveyed enterprises, which is definitely less than when considering these two key areas of international management separately. Only 4.8% of the entities participating in the survey said that level was “high”. A similar percentage of respondents (5.4%) assessed the level of configuration and coordination in their enterprises as “low”, and 1.0% declared a complete lack of effort in these areas.

**Table 2: The level of organisational resource configuration with coordinated activities in the surveyed enterprises – an assessment of foreign affiliates (the second part of the survey)**

Level of resource configuration:	Level of activity coordination:			Lack of proper coordination (%)
	high (%)	medium (%)	low (%)	
high (%)	4.8	8.2	4.6	2.0
medium (%)	10.5	13.8	10.2	7.7
low (%)	5.6	8.9	5.4	2.8
Lack of proper configuration (%)	3.8	7.1	3.6	1.0

Source: own study based on survey results.

**Table 3: Actions aimed at optimising spatial configuration of organisational resources and their importance from the perspective of international competitiveness of the surveyed enterprises – an assessment of parent enterprises (the first part of the survey)**

Actions taken:	Frequency (%)	Importance Rating:	
		Indicator	Rank
delegating to work in foreign affiliates/branches	54.7	3.69	6
transfer of knowledge and skills	51.6	3.89	5
recruiting employees from foreign affiliates/branches	34.4	3.55	7
moving business units abroad	29.7	4.43	1
transfer of production technologies	28.1	4.03	4
creating profit centres abroad	21.9	4.21	2
performing R&D abroad	17.2	4.09	3

Notes: the importance indicator has a weighted average arithmetic structure and takes the value from 1 to 5; respondents rated the importance of individual types of activities on a scale from 1 – “invalid” to 5 – “very important”.

Source: own study based on survey results.

From the point of view of increasing MNE global organisational efficiency, activities aimed at optimising spatial distribution of available resources, i.e. their appropriate geographical relocation and configuration (or reconfiguration) are extremely important. However, the results of the study revealed that nearly half (48.4%) of the participating entities did not take such action at all, 18.8% refused to answer this question, considering the subject to be too sensitive, and 6.2% said they did not have sufficient knowledge to express an opinion. Therefore, only 26.6% of enterprises from the sample (the first part of the survey) confirmed the implementation of activities aimed at optimising spatial configuration of organisational resources. The activities undertaken included mainly (Table 3) delegating employees to foreign affiliates/branches (54.7% of responses) and the transfer of knowledge and skills (51.6%). As part of the efforts in sharing experience and raising skills, 34.4% of

the surveyed entities also posted employees from abroad to the parent company in Poland. Other activities undertaken by the surveyed enterprises included transfer of enterprise units abroad (29.7% of entities), transfer of production technologies (28.1%), creation of profit centres abroad (21.9%), and performing research and development (R&D) abroad (17.2%).

The results of the study revealed that the highest rated actions from the point of view of international competitiveness of the surveyed enterprises are, paradoxically, those that were undertaken least frequently (Table 3). From the point of view of competitiveness, the most important factors were the following: moving business units abroad (4.43 rating), creating profit centres abroad (4.21), performing R&D abroad (4.09), and transfer of production technologies (4.03). The other factors were considered to be important, but not the most important, so they ranked lower even though these actions were implemented most often by enterprises. They were as follows: transfer of knowledge and skills (3.89 rating), delegating employees to work in foreign affiliates/branches (3.69), and recruiting employees from affiliates/branches located abroad (3.55).

## Discussion and Conclusions

Summing up the considerations presented in the paper, it must be pointed out that the spatial configuration of organisational resources and the coordination of business operations within the transnational structures of Polish MNEs remain limited (their level can be generally defined as medium). This means that Polish enterprises experience benefits from international activities, but at the current stage of development, most of them are not yet able to maximise the effects achieved or fully realise the most advanced “Ot” advantages. It seems that this state of affairs may significantly affect the level of their international competitiveness, all the more so nearly half of the entities surveyed did not take active steps in order to optimise the spatial distribution of organisational resources, i.e. their appropriate geographical relocation and configuration (or reconfiguration). Moreover, the identified initiatives focused primarily on better utilisation of human capital throughout the enterprise (mainly by delegating employees to foreign affiliates/branches and knowledge transfers). So they concerned potentially important activities, but – as it turns out – not the most important ones in the context of international competitiveness. Paradoxically, actions identified as the most important (i.e. moving business units, creating profit centres, and performing R&D abroad as well as transfer of production technologies) were undertaken the least often. They obviously require much more organisational effort than the primarily mentioned initiatives. Nevertheless, there is no reason to reject them without careful consideration and thereby to ignore possible economic gains for a company. Our observations suggest, first and foremost, that in the case of Polish MNEs there are many areas of international management that still need improvement. Their managers must be fully aware of the possibility of reaping benefits from multinationality, then identify and monitor emerging opportunities and integrate business activities around the postulate of MNE global organisational effectiveness. The bundle of tasks outlined above will probably constitute the most important challenge for managers in the near future.

Although the results cited here do not directly relate to the types of effects obtained by Polish MNEs thanks to foreign expansion, they correspond well with the work of other authors. Namely, according to a number of studies (Szałucka 2015: 125–149; Trąpczyński 2015: 129–137; Jasiniak 2017: 49–55; Kuzel 2018: 355–366) the benefits highlighted by Polish enterprises as a result of FDI are positive, although their scale remains rather moderate. It seems that the level and range of benefits obtained from the internationalisation of Polish MNEs are essentially related to the current (i.e. medium) stage of their internationalisation. Therefore, they correspond to present possibilities and take into account the consequences of being latecomers in the global economy. It can be expected that the pursuit of a fuller use of already existing resources, access to new ones offered by foreign locations and their appropriate absorption, compilation, reconfiguration and utilisation in the economic systems of Polish MNEs will most likely be one of the most important activities undertaken and intensified in the future. This is mainly so because it is a consistent and logical consequence of the changes accompanying foreign expansion and one of the key aspects of further development of multinational enterprises. Secondly, the results of research on Polish MNEs (Kuzel 2016: 44–53) already indicate that enterprises with relatively the highest degree of internationalisation are the most oriented towards

increasing international competitiveness through appropriate spatial configuration of organisational resources.

We hope that the presented considerations may be an inspiration for further in-depth studies on ways of obtaining and using the most advanced “Ot” advantages, in particular by MNEs representing emerging, developing and less-developed economies. Further research should concentrate on a fuller recognition of how enterprises operate, including the degree of their internationalisation, the scale and scope of their activities as well as their external relationships, the specifics of sectors, socio-economic, cultural or political conditions, as well as comparisons of management styles and MNE development in various parts of the world.

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