

EXPEDITIONARY CULTURE **FIELD GUIDE**

Poland 



About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success.

The guide consists of two parts:

Part 1 “Culture General” provides the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment with a focus on Eastern Europe.

Part 2 “Culture Specific” describes unique cultural features of Polish society. It applies culture-general concepts to help

increase your knowledge of your assigned deployment location. This section is designed to complement other pre-deployment training.

For further information, visit the Air Force Culture and Language

Center (AFCLC) website at www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/ or contact the AFCLC Region Team at AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil.

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PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.

Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing. For example, the American flag is a physical and visual symbol of a core American value – freedom. At the same time, the story of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic because it represents the premium Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.

Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones, where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.



We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature

in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to focus on developing stable political, social, and economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

Cultural Domains

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to perpetuate that culture into the future.



We can organize behaviors and systems into categories – what the Air Force refers to as “cultural domains” – in order to better understand the primary values and characteristics of a

society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains—which include kinship, language and communication, and social and political systems and others (see chart on next page)—as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the way a culture defines family and kinship, a US military member operating overseas can more effectively interact with members of that culture.

Social Behaviors across Cultures

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even group those behaviors differently across cultural boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival,

although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using very basic techniques.

Conversely, industrialized nations have more complex market economies, producing foodstuffs for universal consumption. Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they represent these concepts through a variety of unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.

Worldview

One of our most basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different based on our cultural standards. As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me." Usually, we assume that those in the "like me" category share our perspectives and values.

12 Domains of Culture



This collective perspective forms our worldview—how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an accountability standard for actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.

Cultural Belief System

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system assigns meaning, sets its universal

standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true – regardless of whether there is evidence to



support these ideas. Beliefs are a central aspect of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.

While all people have beliefs, their specific components tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people

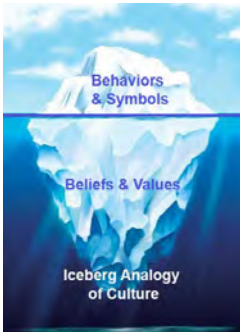
classify as good or bad, right or wrong depends on our deeply-held beliefs we started developing early in life that have helped shape our characters. Likewise, these values are ingrained in our personalities and shape



our behavior patterns and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change.

Core Beliefs

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model



for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the deeper and greater level of the submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).

In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment in order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts.

The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.



As you travel through Eastern Europe, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning that are common across the region. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.

CULTURAL DOMAINS

1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable or which occurred prior to written language.

Eastern Europe comprises 10 countries on the eastern side of the European continent: Belarus, Bulgaria, Czech Republic,



Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Ukraine. Archaeological finds suggest people inhabited the region as early as 40,000 BC. From approximately 10,000-3,000 BC, hunter-gatherers formed semi-permanent settlements, sustained by agriculture and cattle herding. Although short-lived, the Roman Empire's incorporation of much of the region's South in the early centuries AD significantly influenced culture in present-day Romania, Bulgaria, and Slovenia. Slavic tribes settled in the plains of present-day Ukraine beginning in the 6th-century AD, eventually moving west and south along the fertile basin of the Danube River.

Over the following centuries, various migratory peoples from elsewhere in Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia continued to settle in the region, expelling, conquering, or mixing with the Slavs and other inhabitants. By the 10th century, loosely aligned settlements coalesced into large, powerful kingdoms, including the Bohemian Empire centered in present-day Czech Republic and the Kingdoms of Hungary, Poland, and Bulgaria. In the 14th century, much of the region fell to the Ottoman Empire, based in present-day Turkey, with many of the region's residents experiencing several centuries of Turkish raids.

While present-day Bulgaria and parts of Romania remained under Ottoman rule for over 500 years, in the 16th century, many regions became subject to the rule of the Austrian House of Habsburg – one of Europe's most influential royal dynasties that later joined Hungary to form the powerful Austro-Hungarian Empire. Meanwhile, Poland formed an independent state, eventually uniting with neighboring Lithuania to control large parts of the region, including Ukraine and Belarus.

Unable to repel persistent attacks from neighbors, the Polish-Lithuanian Empire disintegrated in the late 18th century, with Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus falling under Russian control for the next nearly 120 years. During this time, Russia violently quelled nationalist movements, suppressed regional languages,

and deported thousands of native inhabitants while encouraging Russian immigration into the region.



All 10 Eastern European states experienced substantial conflict during World War I (WWI). Immediately

following the war, most states enjoyed brief periods of independence. By contrast, the newly formed Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) absorbed Belarus, parts of Moldova, and Ukraine, all of which suffered severely under communist repression. Notably, after its defeat in WWI, the Austro-Hungarian Empire splintered. Hungary consequently lost nearly 2/3 of its territory and 3/5 of its people to neighboring nations.

With the onset of World War II (WWII), all 10 states again became battlegrounds. While some immediately sided with the Axis powers, others were unable to withstand German aggression. All 10 states suffered heavy casualties throughout the war. During its occupation of the region, Nazi Germany murdered, deported, or confined most of the region's sizeable Jewish population and other "undesirables."

At war's end, the USSR either absorbed or heavily influenced the political, social, and economic systems of each Eastern

European state. Adopting communist tenets, each state nationalized private companies, appropriated private property, and rapidly expanded industrial development. Communist leaders also encouraged Russification in the region, violently repressing national languages, religions, and cultures.

In the late 1980s, democratic movements swept across the Soviet bloc, and within a few years, all 10 states had declared independence from the USSR. Further, they removed communist leaders, transformed their governments, and adopted market capitalism. Since then, all states but Belarus largely pivoted away from Russian influence to pursue political, military, and economic integration with the West.

2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social

relations are all the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community. All 10 Eastern European states are parliamentary republics led by an elected Prime Minister, President,



and legislature. In most states, Presidential powers are largely ceremonial with executive power vested in the Prime Minister, who leads the government together with the support of a Cabinet of Ministers. In most states, political parties typically form coalitions in order to attain and maintain power.

With most having suffered crippling dictatorial rule for much of the late 20th century, each Eastern European state emerged in the 1990s with new political, social, and economic structures. While some states have since created relatively stable, well-run democracies, others face challenges to the democratic process. Corruption is a prevalent problem in the region. In some cases, governments' inability to adequately curb widespread corruption results in frequent public protests, causes distrust of public

officials, and creates an overall skepticism of the democratic process. Moreover, weakened by overly broad and at times differing ideological profiles, ruling political coalitions and parties tend to dissolve frequently, resulting in a political landscape marked by infighting and successive changes of government.

Most states are members of strong regional alliances, such as the European Union (EU) and NATO. Although somewhat fraught with political instability, most states remain committed to improving democratic processes, serving as advocates of a democratic and pro-Western agenda in the region. By contrast, Belarus is politically aligned with Russia, while Ukraine and Bulgaria have historically attempted to balance relations between the West and Russia, at times resulting in internal tension between ideologically opposing political groups.



With the exception of Belarus, the states rely on NATO, the EU, the US, and other international support to defend against external, state-level threats. Russia's recent aggression in the region, notably its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, has significantly heightened regional tensions and consequently dominates the states' security environment.

The region exhibits differing levels of ethnic diversity. Poland, for example, is largely homogenous, with ethnic Poles comprising 99% of the population. By contrast, the native populations of Ukraine and Czech Republic are significantly lower, 78% and 57%, respectively. Notably, the Roma and other ethnic minorities suffer significant social division, discrimination, and stigmatization across Eastern Europe.

3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also

create social unity by defining shared identity, offer individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society.

Early residents of Eastern Europe practiced a variety of indigenous religions, venerating multiple deities and spirits who inhabited the natural world. Romans introduced Christianity as early as the 1st century. By the 10th century, many Eastern European kingdoms had adopted Christianity as a state religion. In the early 11th century, theological differences between western and eastern branches of the Christian movement forced a permanent divide between the Roman Catholic Church centered in Rome and the Eastern Orthodox tradition of the Byzantine Empire. Over subsequent centuries, both branches of Christianity flourished in the region. Later, as the Protestant Reformation swept across Europe, some states saw the Catholic



Church reorganize under Lutheran authority. Across the region, Christianity became closely linked to national identity.

In Poland, for example, the Catholic Church became entrenched

in daily life, influencing education, social services, and remaining politically influential even today. Throughout the centuries, Judaism also enjoyed growth in the region, with among others, Polish and Czech Jewish communities growing significantly until their annihilation during WWII.

During their years of occupation and influence, the Soviets suppressed all religious institutions and activities in the states, while simultaneously cultivating atheism and encouraging the devout to abandon long-held religious beliefs. To do so, the states' communist governments carefully regulated religious affairs and deported clergy, while destroying or converting most churches and synagogues for other uses. Consequently, membership in religious organizations decreased significantly over the years. Nevertheless, most states saw a resurgence in

religiosity once religious freedom was restored following the fall of communism.

Today, some of the region's inhabitants are Orthodox Christian, while others – including the majority of Poles (85%), Slovaks (56%), Slovenes (74%), and Hungarians (28%) – are Roman Catholic. Notably, while most Eastern Europeans retain deep religious convictions, others remain religiously unaffiliated. For example, only about 78% of Belarusians claim a religious affiliation – the lowest rate in the region -- while large numbers of Slovenes, Slovaks, and Czechs are atheist. In parts of the region, small Jewish and Muslim communities are experiencing some growth. One notable exception is Bulgaria, where a relatively large Muslim community (11% of the population) traces back to the early 14th century.

4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called “fictive kin”).

Family life and relationships are highly valued within Eastern European societies. Residents maintain strong connections with both immediate and extended family



members, supporting them emotionally and financially and providing physical care for elderly or ailing kin if needed. Most households comprise 2 parents and their children (nuclear family), with many families choosing to have just 1 or 2 children. Nevertheless, extended kin on both sides of the family often live nearby and are significantly influential in family matters.

Rapid urbanization has changed family life in recent years, as urban inhabitants marry later or cohabit (live in long-term, unmarried partnership) and have fewer children. Consequently,

while the traditional family structure remains common in rural areas, it is more diverse in urban centers.

While historically marriage was an arranged union, today Eastern Europeans typically choose their own partners. Couples may spend several years dating, live together, and have children before choosing to marry. In some states, divorce is increasingly prevalent among younger generations, with rates comparable to the US. Still in others, the practice is relatively uncommon and carries social stigma.

5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that refers to a culture's categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles.

The Eastern European states' historically patriarchal culture privileged men as leaders and providers. While some of the region's inhabitants continue to adhere to traditional values – men as breadwinners and heads of household and women as mothers and wives – gender roles and responsibilities began to transform during the Soviet era and continue to change today, particularly among younger generations.



Although women hold equal rights under the law, political, social, and economic inequalities between the genders remain. For example, women often face discrimination in the

hiring and promotion process, routinely receive lower wages than their male counterparts, and suffer from sexual harassment in the workplace.

Despite these barriers, the number of women serving in the political sector across the region has increased over the past few decades. Eastern European women hold a significant proportion of national and sub-national government positions, with most

states maintaining similar or higher female participation rates in their national legislatures as the US.

Notably, the region's women suffer high rates of gender-based violence (GBV), particularly domestic abuse and rape. Often considered private matters, many incidences of GBV go unreported. If cases are reported, the prosecution of perpetrators is rare. Although homosexuality is legal throughout the region, same-sex marriage is not legal in most countries in Eastern Europe, except in Slovenia.

6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally. Most of the region's languages

derive from the Slavic branch of the Indo-European language family, while Moldovan and Romanian belong to the same family's Eastern Romance branch. A member of the Uralic family, Hungarian is the region's only language



not part of the Indo-European family. Notably, the Bulgarian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian languages are written in the Cyrillic alphabet. By contrast, all other state languages employ the Latin script.

Some states managed to largely avoid harsh Russification policies during the Soviet era. Others suffered years of linguistic repression when Russian became the predominant language in education, the media, and government proceedings. Today, with the exception of Belarus, Russian is no longer the region's main language. Instead, native languages have largely supplanted Russian, though some residents continue to use Russian in business and everyday life. The states are also home to native speakers of other languages, notably Romani (the language of the Roma), Turkish, German, and other regional languages.

English has become increasingly popular over the last several decades and is spoken widely in business and by young, urban residents.

Generally, the region's residents demonstrate respect, privacy, and candor in their communication practices. In some states, communications reflect notable emotion and engagement. By contrast, others typically refrain from displaying strong emotions in public, feel comfortable in silence, and prefer quiet speech. Across the region, residents usually share personal information only with family or close friends and are reserved when interacting with strangers.

7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health requirements) and culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning to the community). This knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized

systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers.

Prior to the 14th century, most formal education in the region occurred in religious institutions where clergymen taught religion and

basic literacy. Notably, while Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic had established universities as early as the 14th century, secular centers of higher academic learning were slow to develop elsewhere in the region. Nevertheless, by the late 1800s, extensive public school networks administered both religious and secular curricula to millions of students across the region.

Most Eastern European governments established free and compulsory public education systems in the early 20th century.



The subsequent Soviet occupation and influence brought significant changes to schools and curricula. During that period, the education system promoted Soviet ideology and communist tenets and emphasized Russian culture and language. It also prioritized vocational instruction, while simultaneously suppressing Eastern European languages and culture.

Today, most Eastern European students receive free and compulsory schooling at the primary and secondary levels. School enrollment rates are high, and nearly 100% of Eastern European residents are literate. Challenges to the education systems include low teacher salaries, rural school closures, and disparities in educational attainment between majority groups and linguistic and ethnic minorities.

8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. As in most Western cultures, Eastern Europeans tend to be preoccupied more with time management than relationship-building. They too value punctuality, a sense of responsibility, and candid professional interactions. Within their personal lives, however, most Eastern Europeans invest significant time into establishing and maintaining relationships.

They also like to build relations before conducting business, which tends to move more slowly in Eastern Europe than in the US. Throughout the region, residents usually begin discussions with light



conversation. Most communication is explicit and direct, with frequent eye contact. Eastern Europeans generally require less personal space when conversing than is common in the US. One exception is in Slovenia, where residents maintain about the same personal distance as in the US.

Eastern European states observe a number of public holidays such as Christmas, Easter, and their respective independence

day. Further, all Eastern European states commemorate both the end of World War II and the Soviet era, as well as unique seasonal or harvest holidays.

9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill and style. Most Eastern European forms of artistic expression – including art, architecture, dance, music, and theater – reflect the region's rural peasant past, history of foreign presence, and modern global trends.

Traditional music and dance in Eastern Europe typically promote themes such as nature, the seasons, rural life, and love. Folk songs, festivals, and dance are particularly popular in rural areas, often utilizing traditional instruments. Most common dances are performed in pairs, circles, or lines. Under Russian and Soviet influence, classical ballet became a common form of dance across the region. Classical music and opera remain popular, as well as rock, jazz, and international pop music. Government financing for the arts largely declined after the



Soviet era, yet artistic freedom has increased significantly.

Rural landscapes and geometric designs are common themes in visual arts. Eastern Europeans also practice various traditional handicrafts

and folk art that reflect the region's rich peasant history, along with Christian or ancient pagan motifs. Common handicrafts include pottery, embroidery, and baskets. Soccer is the most widely followed sport in the region, followed by basketball, volleyball, and gymnastics. During the winter, residents also enjoy ice hockey, skiing, and ice skating.

10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures, and economics. Theories of disease

and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.

Eastern European dishes tend to be simple, hearty, and mildly seasoned. Most meals consist of a staple, such as potatoes, oats, or barley served with a meat, fresh salad, and various breads. While beer is the most popular alcoholic beverage, some residents enjoy unique herbal liquors or vodka. Notably, the region also has a rich history of wine production, dating back to the 1st century BC.



Health in Eastern Europe has improved significantly in recent decades, evidenced by decreased infant and maternal mortality rates and longer life expectancies. Most residents have access to free, state-funded healthcare in modern facilities.

Nevertheless, the region's healthcare systems face several challenges. The quality of care varies significantly between private/public and urban/rural facilities. Generally, public facilities concentrate in cities and are ill-equipped, overcrowded, understaffed, and plagued by corruption. Meanwhile, private facilities offer first-rate care mostly to the wealthy. Finally, a shrinking yet aging population threatens to burden already overloaded national healthcare services in many states.

Non-communicable "lifestyle" diseases such as cardiovascular, cancer, respiratory, liver and diabetes account for the majority of deaths across Eastern Europe. In addition, the region's residents suffer from high rates of suicide and alcohol poisoning. Mostly a result of Soviet-era industrial policies, pollution is a widespread hazard throughout Eastern Europe, causing further health-related issues.

11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services.

Prior to the 19th century, the Eastern European states maintained largely agrarian economies, with residents engaging in subsistence agriculture or laboring as serfs on large elite landholdings.

During the 1800s, several states began to industrialize, while Bulgaria, Moldova, Romania, and Slovenia remained primarily agrarian. Industrialization intensified throughout the region in the Soviet era, when all states followed a centrally-controlled and



planned economic system, establishing large collective farms and developing various heavy industries.

Following the end of communism, the states immediately

sought to decentralize their economies and adopt liberal, free market systems. While the transition initially caused their economies to contract, by the early 2000s, all 10 nations experienced growth. For most states, accession into the EU further spurred economic expansion. In 2008, the global financial crisis slowed investment in the region, reducing demand for exports and causing severe economic contractions in every state except Poland and Belarus.

Some of the states reacted quickly to the crisis with strict internal reforms which allowed their economies to rebound within a few years. Others were slow to respond and suffered a protracted recession. Notably, the crisis in Ukraine has hurt that country's recent economic growth, while Belarus continues to experience economic stagnation.

The economic outlook in the region is varied. Some states such as Romania, Czech Republic, and Slovenia appear poised to maintain stable growth rates. The non-EU member states of Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova are impacted the most by geopolitical events in Russia. All 10 states are vulnerable to economic fluctuations due to their export-oriented economies. Some common economic challenges include persistent corruption, aging populations, and emigration of skilled workers.

The EU is by far the region's largest trading partner, except for Belarus, which heavily relies on trade with Russia. As EU members, most Eastern European states benefit from a secure business environment and free movement of goods and services.

12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology. All 10 Eastern European states have invested in extensive road networks and efficient public transportation systems, particularly in urban areas. While Slovenia maintains the region's best roads, Ukraine and Romania have some of the world's worst. Rural infrastructure is typically less developed, and corruption often impedes progress on road and rail projects.

Generally in better condition than roads, railways connect major cities throughout the



region, though some services are slow and inefficient. The Black Sea and major rivers, notably the Danube, host important ports. Although modern information technology is available in all states, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Bulgaria, and Romania have some of Europe's least developed networks. Internet use also varies widely, with 92% of Belarussians using the Internet at home compared to approximately 64% of Moldovans.

While Poland relies on fossil fuels for 73% of its electricity production, nuclear fuels account for 44% of Hungary's electricity generation. Most Eastern European states depend on imported natural gas and oil from Russia and the Middle East. Governments throughout the region have announced their intention to increase the use of renewable resources such as hydroelectric plants, wind, and other renewables.

Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize Eastern European society at large, we will focus on specific features of Polish society.

PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

1. HISTORY AND MYTH

Overview

In its long history, Poland has experienced flourishing heights of nationhood and brutal foreign oppression. Established by Slavic tribes in the 1st millennium AD, Poland rose to become a major European power by the 16th century then fell prey to European expansionism. By the late 18th century, Poland had been erased from the map of Europe. Ruled by competing European empires for 123 years, Poles endured the suppression of their language, traditions, and culture. Re-emerging in the early 20th century, Poland suffered devastation during World War II and then decades of oppressive rule under a Soviet-backed communist government. In 1989, Poland became the first Soviet bloc

country to embrace democracy and the free market.

Early History

Evidence of early human activity in Poland includes stone artifacts dating to about 100,000 years found at Ciemna



Cave near the modern-day city of Kraków. Poland became too cold for human habitation during the last Ice Age, yet by about 12,000 BC, conditions had warmed enough for vegetation and animals to return. Hunter-gatherers likely followed reindeer as they migrated into the region.

By the 6th millennium BC, semi-permanent farming communities formed in the Vistula and Oder river basins. Houses were typically simple wooden constructions partially situated underground for protection from the cold. Inhabitants also made pottery, traded copper, and mined flint in the Holy Cross

Mountains and salt near Kraków. A settlement in north-central Poland dating around 4,300 BC featured fortifications, over 30 longhouses, and copper jewelry. By about 2,500 BC, inhabitants constructed hilltop settlements with earthen and timber fortifications.

Around 500 BC, Celtic tribes moved into southern Poland, while Germanic tribes occupied the North. Around the turn of the millennium, Germanic tribes gradually expelled



the Celts. During this period, regional inhabitants began participating in profitable trade networks that extended from northern Europe as far as the Roman Empire in the South.

Arrival of the Slavs

Meanwhile, Slavic tribes were leaving their homeland in Central Asia, settling north of the Black Sea by around the turn of the millennium. In the 5th century AD, Germanic tribes moved south to invade the Roman Empire, disrupting the Slavs' Black Sea settlements and prompting many to migrate again. While other Slavic groups moved northeast and south, the ancestors of the Poles, known as the West Slavs, spread through much of Central Europe. Between the 5th-8th centuries, they settled much of modern-day Poland, displacing or absorbing the Germanic communities.

The Polanie: One of these Slavic groups, the Polanie ("people of the field"), gave Poland its name. Settling on the Warta River in west-central Poland, the Polanie united under tribal chief Piast in the 10th century.

The Piast Dynasty

Seeking to enlarge his holdings, Poland's leader Duke Mieszko I came into conflict with regional rivals. The Germanic Holy Roman Empire was especially threatening, seeking to expand eastward while Christianizing pagan tribes such as the Slavs. To avoid invasion and forced conversion, Mieszko I appealed

directly to the Catholic Church in Rome for support and adopted Christianity in 966 (see *Religion and Spirituality*). This move, recognized by many Poles as the beginning of Polish history, established Mieszko I as a subject of the Pope (the leader of the Catholic Church), giving him legitimacy before other Christian regional rulers.



Expansion to Kingdom: Until his death in 992, Mieszko I worked to expand the Duchy from his capital at Gniezno (see “The Legend of Lech, Czech, and Rus” below), conquering several neighboring Slavic tribes and establishing borders similar to those of modern-day Poland. His son, Duke Bolesław I Chrobry (“the Brave”), also

held these expansionist goals, conquering areas of modern-day Ukraine. In 1025, Gniezno’s Catholic archbishop crowned Bolesław I the King, making Poland equal to Europe’s other monarchies.

Division and Restoration: In subsequent years, a succession of conflicts divided the Kingdom, and neighboring states preyed upon it, seizing territory. Seeking to end instability on his border, in 1038 the Holy Roman Emperor lent financial and military support to the campaign of his relative and grandson of Bolesław I, Grand duke Kazimierz I, to gain the Polish throne. Known as “the Restorer,” Kazimierz I reclaimed lost territory and moved the Polish capital to Kraków, where it would remain until 1596.

The Period of Divisions

Kazimierz I and his successors engaged in several border wars while quelling internal strife. By the early 13th century, Poland was fragmented by infighting and succession conflicts that caused instability lasting nearly 200 years.

The Teutonic Knights: Meanwhile, pagan Lithuanians, Prussians, and other groups were threatening the North. In 1226, Polish Duke Conrad invited the Teutonic Knights, a

German Christian military order, to support him in his conflicts with the Prussians. Conrad granted the Knights a territorial base, yet the Knights soon turned on the Poles to pursue their own



expansionist goals. After a series of ruthless campaigns, the Knights subjugated the Prussians by 1283, established their own feudal state, and repopulated it with German settlers. Having control of the Polish port city of Gdańsk (called Danzig by the Germans), this powerful state was able to deny the Poles' access to the Baltic Sea.

Tatar Invasions: Between 1241-1297, Muslim Tatars from Central Asia raided South and Central Poland, destroying major towns, decimating the Polish population,

then mostly retreating (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Subsequently, German settlers moved in to fill the void.

Economic and Social Changes: Despite this upheaval, Poland's salt, silver, and gold mining industries grew in the 13th century. Further, large landed estates formed, employing free tenant farmers. The promise of personal freedom, fixed rents, and limited self-governance attracted additional settlers from German-speaking areas. In 1264, the High Duke of Poland, Bolesław V, granted Jews personal freedom, legal autonomy, and protection against forced baptism into the Christian faith. Experiencing persecution in the West, many Jews subsequently resettled in Polish lands (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

The Last Piast: Kazimierz III Wielki

In the 14th century, Kazimierz III Wielki ("the Great", r. 1333-70) consolidated the Kingdom's holdings, while annexing territories in modern-day Ukraine. With this expansion, the Kingdom grew beyond ethnic Polish territory for the first time.

Kazimierz III's almost 40-year reign included several significant achievements. He proposed a legal code, introduced a new form of currency, oversaw the construction of numerous castles and

cathedrals, and founded one of Europe's first universities, known today as the Jagiellonian University (see *Learning and Knowledge*). He also opened the entire Kingdom to Jewish settlement, resulting in the development of an important Jewish center in the town of Kazimierz, adjacent to Kraków, (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Despite this progress, Kazimierz III failed to reclaim Polish territories still under the control of Bohemia and the Teutonic Knights.

Union with Lithuania: the Jagiellonian Dynasty

Upon Kazimierz III's death, his nephew, King Louis of Hungary, ascended to the Polish throne. After Louis' death in 1382, Polish nobles selected his 10-year old daughter Jadwiga as an interim "King," the only Polish female to ever hold this title. The Polish nobility then chose Duke Jogaila of Lithuania as Jadwiga's future husband, who would replace her as King. Lithuania at that time was a large, multi-ethnic state comprising much of present-day Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine. The pagan Lithuanians hoped that Poland would help protect them from the crusading Teutonic Knights. Complying with Poland's request, Jogaila adopted Christianity and was baptized Władysław II Jagiełło. A year later he became King of Poland upon his marriage to Jadwiga.



Władysław II's rule (1386-1434) marked the beginning of the Polish-Lithuanian union, creating what was Europe's largest country at the time. Together, the Poles and Lithuanians managed to keep invaders, such as the Tatars, Teutonic Knights, Russians, and Ottoman Turks at bay while extending their borders from the Baltic to the Black Sea. The Jagiellonian dynasty would rule Poland for almost 200 years.

Battle of Grunwald: Meanwhile, the Teutonic Knights continued to invade Polish-Lithuanian territory on the pretext of Christianizing any pagan inhabitants. When residents rebelled

against the Germans in 1409, the Polish-Lithuanian state rallied to their support, raising an Army of 150,000 against the Germans' force of 80,000. The armies met at Grunwald (near the present-day Polish village of Stębark) in 1410. The ensuing day-long conflict resulted in a crushing defeat for the Knights.



Skirmishes with the Teutonic Knights continued for decades, yet by the mid-15th century, the weakened Knights had relinquished territories, most notably the port of Gdańsk, thus restoring Poland's access to the Baltic Sea. During the late 15th century, Poland's first **Sejm** or Parliament (see *Political and Social*

Relations) was established, and the Polish-Lithuanian union expanded into neighboring Bohemia and Hungary. As Jagiellonian control was established over nearly all of Central and Eastern Europe, the Polish-Lithuanian union enjoyed a long period of prosperity and growth.

The Golden Age

The reigns of the last 2 Jagiellonian kings, Zygmunt I Stary ("the Old") (r. 1506-48) and Zygmunt II August (r. 1548-72), comprised a Golden Age for Poland. A new Constitution stipulated that proposed laws required approval by the *Sejm*, curbing the King's power and opening law-making authority to the landed nobility. Polish literature flourished (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*), and the university in Kraków became a center of astronomical-mathematical thought. This institute of higher learning would educate scientists like Mikołaj Kopernik (Nicolaus Copernicus), who advanced the revolutionary idea that the sun, not the Earth, was the center of the solar system (see *Learning and Knowledge*).

Poland-Lithuania comprised a massive territory with dozens of ethnic groups. Besides Poles and Lithuanians, the union was home to Estonians, Latvians, Ukrainians, Prussians, Bohemians, Hungarians, and Tatars, among others. Poland also

became a center of religious tolerance during this period. As the rest of Europe was rocked by conflict during the Reformation and Counter Reformation (see *Religion and Spirituality*), the 1573 Compact of Warsaw guaranteed religious freedom for all Christians. Further, Jews in Poland continued to avoid the restrictions and persecution prevalent in other European countries, and by the late 16th century, Poland had the world's largest Jewish population, estimated at 150,000 (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Despite these positive developments, the region's peasants saw their plight worsen over the course of the 16th century. Gradually, small landowners lost control of their lands and were forced to become serfs – enslaved laborers who were bought and sold with the land they worked for wealthy landowners.

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

Meanwhile, the union faced a mounting menace from expansionist Russia to the East and the Ottoman Turks in the South. To ensure support in the face of these threats, the Polish King sought permanent unification with Lithuania. The subsequent 1569



Union of Lublin established the Republic of the Two Nations, also known as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. A joint state with a single ruler, the Commonwealth had a legislative assembly and a common currency. While Poland was clearly the dominant partner, each part retained administrative control of its territory, treasury, and Army. To mark the new relationship, the Commonwealth chose Warsaw as its new capital in 1596. At its climax, the Commonwealth comprised nearly 400,000 sq mi (more than 3 times Poland's present size), some 11 million inhabitants, and would last for over 200 years.

The Royal Republic: In the Commonwealth, the combined office of King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania became an elected one. Electors comprised the nobility known as the *szlachta* – about 10% of the population. While candidates for

office had to be Roman Catholics, there were few other requirements. Consequently, Commonwealth heads were not necessarily Lithuanian or Polish. Instead, the nobility often elected leaders of other nationalities, such as a Frenchman, a Transylvanian prince, and a series of Swedish nobles.

Nicknamed the “Royal Republic” due to its elected ruler, the Commonwealth was relatively successful initially. Over the years, Polish culture and



language came to dominate as Poles settled throughout the Commonwealth. Nevertheless, within a few decades, it became apparent that the Commonwealth's governing structure was unsound. Because its leaders often had conflicts of interest or were beholden to other foreign powers, the Commonwealth had periods of inconsistent governance. Beginning in 1652, legislative efforts became paralyzed by the assembly's rule that only 1 member's veto was required to stop legislation.

The Deluge: Concurrently, a series of other challenges known as the *potop* (“deluge”) arose. Ukrainians in the Commonwealth rebelled, seeking their own state, and in 1654, Russians occupied the Commonwealth's East. Soon, Protestant Sweden launched its own invasion, sacking and destroying Catholic churches and monasteries (see *Religion and Spirituality*) and briefly conquering the Commonwealth. Although the Commonwealth suppressed the rebellion and repelled the 2 invaders, the efforts depleted the state's coffers. Between 1648-1667, conflict, famine, and disease resulted in the deaths of about 1/3 of the population.

Yet, the Commonwealth experienced some success during this period. Polish forces led by King Jan III Sobieski played a pivotal role in repelling Muslim Ottoman Turkish invaders in Ukraine in 1673 and in Austria a decade later. Today, many Poles still recognize this feat as the moment Poland “saved” Christian Europe from Muslim rule.

Decline and Partition

In the early 18th century, the Commonwealth attacked Sweden. After defeating the Commonwealth, the Swedes deposed its ruler and, in collusion with Russian Tsar Peter I ("the Great"), handpicked a new leader. Over the next century, the Commonwealth came under the heavy influence of Russia, which maneuvered to ensure its preferred leaders took office.

By the mid-18th century, the Commonwealth saw significant internal unrest compounded by continuing interference by its powerful neighbors. In 1768, civil war erupted. Severely weakened, the Commonwealth was largely unable to resist its foreign rivals, who beginning in 1772, moved to divide the Commonwealth among themselves. That year, the Commonwealth lost about 30% of its territory to Prussia, Austria, and Russia. In an effort to avoid further partition, the Commonwealth initiated several reforms, including emancipating its serfs and ending the parliament's paralyzing veto rule. In 1791, the Commonwealth adopted Europe's first and the world's second Constitution (after the US). This "May 3 Constitution" is celebrated with a national holiday today (see *Time and Space*).

These reform efforts alarmed the Commonwealth's rivals. In 1792, Russia invaded, and despite vigorous resistance, the Commonwealth underwent a 2nd partition in 1793 that resulted in Prussia claiming the Polish port city of Gdańsk.

A year later, Polish military engineer and hero of the American Revolution Tadeusz Kościuszko led a popular insurrection against the Russians. Despite some initial success, the revolt was soon suppressed. Russia, Prussia, and Austria then partitioned the Commonwealth for a 3rd and final time in 1795. Prussia absorbed Western and Northern Poland, Austria claimed Southern Poland, and Russia controlled Eastern Poland



and most of Lithuania. Poland remained absent from the map of Europe for the next 123 years.

Resistance in Partitioned Poland

Many European leaders condemned the partitioning of Poland as an international crime, yet Napoleon's revolution in France distracted European powers from what became known as the "Polish Question." Nevertheless, Polish identity persisted as resistance to oppression took many forms.



The Duchy of Warsaw: Polish resistance efforts focused initially on French Emperor Napoleon and his quest to establish a European empire. Beginning in 1797, Polish volunteer legions joined Napoleon's forces in his various campaigns. After Napoleon's 1806 defeat of Prussia, Polish armed units aligned with the French. In return, Napoleon created the Duchy of Warsaw from the conquered Prussian territory in 1807. Following victory against the Austrians in 1809, the Duchy reclaimed Austrian-held Polish territory and grew to include some 4 million people and the cities of Warsaw, Kraków, and Poznań. Hoping a victory would continue to further their cause, some 100,000 Polish soldiers participated in Napoleon's disastrous invasion of Russia in 1812. Following Napoleon's defeat, the 1815 Congress of Vienna dissolved the Duchy, returned some of its territory to Prussia, made Kraków a free city, and reorganized the remaining territory as the Congress Kingdom of Poland.

The Congress Kingdom: Never an independent state, the Congress Kingdom gradually came under tighter control of Russia, whose Eastern European holdings also included the former Commonwealth territories of Lithuania, Ukraine, and Belarus. Meanwhile, the Poles continued to plot against their foreign rulers, forming secret societies and staging a series of uprisings between 1830-1863.

The 1830 uprising occurred in Warsaw and became a full-fledged war that spread to Lithuania. Following suppression of the uprising, Russia conducted severe reprisals, arrests, and deportations. Many of Poland's intellectual elite fled to France, including famed composer Frédéric Chopin. From France, Polish writers and artists looked to their nation's plight as inspiration (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*).



Meanwhile, conflict within partitioned Poland continued. Following an 1846 uprising in free Kraków, the Austrians re-took the city, provoking additional violence and inspiring larger revolts in 1848. While Russia implemented reforms following its 1856 defeat in the Crimean War, unrest continued. In the 1863 “January Insurrection,” fighting extended into Lithuania and Belarus.

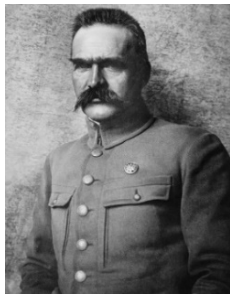
Vistula Land: In subsequent decades, Russia carried out additional reprisals in the region it now called Vistula Land. The Russians stepped up deportations to Siberia, while confiscating estates. They also implemented anti-Catholic and Russification policies, such as banning the Polish language and supporting the Orthodox Church (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Meanwhile, rapid industrialization and urbanization made Vistula Land the Russian Empire's most developed region.

In 1871, Prussia joined with other Germanic kingdoms and duchies to form the German Empire. In their partitioned territories, the Germans initiated harsh anti-Catholic and Germanization policies. By contrast, Poles in the Austrian-controlled region enjoyed some political autonomy, while institutions like the university in Kraków helped Polish culture flourish. Nevertheless, many Poles across the partitioned territories avoided political and economic hardships by migrating elsewhere. Between 1870-1914, some 3.6 million Poles permanently left the region, many immigrating to the US.

Rise of Political Movements: In the 1890s, Polish political movements gained momentum. Lower-class grievances and Polish nationalism found voice in Józef Piłsudski's Polish Socialist Party, while Roman Dmowski's National Democracy party emphasized the Polish nationalist struggle combined with anti-Jewish and anti-Ukrainian sentiment.

World War I (WWI)

When WWI broke out in 1914, these political leaders aligned along opposite sides in the hope that the winner would support Poland's post-war liberation. Piłsudski led a brigade for the Central Powers, comprising Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria, while Dmowski sided with the Allies, comprising France, Britain, Russia, and the US.



In 1915, the Central Powers expelled Russia from the Congress Kingdom, and a year later, proclaimed a new Polish state. Although its borders remained undefined, the move brought renewed international attention to the "Polish Question."

Unsatisfied with progress toward independence, Piłsudski demanded concrete promises from the Central Powers, prompting Germany to jail him in 1917 and increasing his renown as a Polish patriot. In Paris, meanwhile, Dmowski founded the Polish National Committee which organized a Polish Army comprised primarily of American Poles to fight for the French.

In 1917, the Russians were too preoccupied by civil war to engage closely in Polish affairs. In early 1918, US President Wilson made the creation of an independent Polish state one of his "Fourteen Points" for postwar peace negotiations. With the Austrian Empire's collapse and the German Army's surrender in late 1918, WWI ended. In sum, WWI devastated Poland. Of the approximately 2 million Polish troops conscripted to fight for the Russian, German, or Austrian armies, some 450,000 died. Much of the fighting took place on Polish territory, where scorched earth strategies left many regions uninhabitable.

Independence

At war's end, Piłsudski declared Poland's independence and himself head of state. The 1919 Treaty of Versailles transferred territories, notably the so-called "Polish Corridor" granting access to the Baltic Sea, from defeated Germany to the new Republic of Poland. Even though that region was historically Polish and inhabited by a Polish majority, this transfer provoked significant resentment among Germans because it cut off the German Empire from its territories in East Prussia. In fact, this transfer would become Nazi Germany's excuse for invasion some 20 years later (see "World War II" below). The transfer did not include the majority-German port city of Gdańsk, which became a free city.

Meanwhile, Poland's other borders remained undefined as Poland clashed with nearly all its neighbors. Seeking to construct a bulwark against expansionist Russia, now the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Piłsudski pursued a renewed Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, though Lithuania rejected the idea. Within a month of WWI's end, the USSR, Poland, and Lithuania were fighting over boundaries.

Polish-Soviet War: Throughout 1919, Polish forces battled the Soviets. Fighting centered in Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania until mid-1920, when Soviet forces pushed all the way to Warsaw. There, Piłsudski's troops stopped the Soviet advance in the 2-week Battle



of Warsaw, an event commemorated every year as Armed Forces Day (see *Time and Space*). Peace negotiations in 1921 awarded significant territory to Poland, including parts of Ukraine, Belarus, and much of southern Lithuania and its capital, Vilnius, which Poland would hold until the start of World War II.

The Second Republic

With more than 27 million inhabitants, inter-war Poland was Europe's sixth-largest country. Following 1919 parliamentary

elections, Piłsudski relinquished some powers to the *Sejm* while remaining head-of-state. A new Constitution in 1921 granted the *Sejm* more power than the executive branch, and a year later, Piłsudski retired from office.



The new parliamentary system proved unstable. The first elected President held office only a few days before his assassination. In 1926, Piłsudski reemerged to lead an armed demonstration against the political stalemate, then staged a coup. Refusing to take office as President, Piłsudski installed his own candidate then became Defense Minister. Although not occupying the Presidency, Piłsudski held ultimate power, suppressing the opposition

and establishing an authoritarian military regime. Upon Piłsudski's 1935 death, Marshal Edward Rydz-Śmigły assumed leadership of Poland until its 1939 invasion and occupation.

The 1920s saw significant industrialization and agrarian reform as Polish cultural and intellectual life blossomed. The Great Depression hit Poland hard in the 1930s, contributing to widespread unemployment and poverty. Meanwhile, other challenges arose. A defining feature of the newly-independent country was its Polish Catholic identity, yet Poland was also home to significant populations of Ukrainians (around 16% of the total population) and Jews (about 10%), as well as numerous Belarusians and Germans. Poland's Ukrainian populations rejected Polish rule, with extremists committing acts of terrorism as Poles responded in kind. In the 1930s, Poland experienced waves of anti-Semitism, though Poland never introduced any anti-Jewish legislation.

Expansionist Neighbors: Compounding its internal tensions, Poland faced aggressive posturing from its expansionist neighbors, Germany and the USSR. In the early 1930s, Poland signed nonaggression pacts with both countries, hoping these agreements would prevent invasion.

Germany under Nazi leader Adolf Hitler became increasingly belligerent. In March 1939, Germany demanded that Poland return the “Polish Corridor.” Poland refused, then negotiated a mutual defense alliance with Britain and France. Just 5 months later, unbeknownst to Poland and the rest of Europe, Germany and the USSR signed a nonaggression pact which divided Eastern Europe into Soviet and German spheres of influence while partitioning Poland between the 2 powers.

World War II (WWII)

On September 1, 1939, on the pretext of recovering Gdańsk and the “Polish Corridor,” Germany invaded Poland, initiating WWII. While Britain and France quickly declared war on Germany, they were unable to provide Poland



much-needed military support. A few weeks later, the USSR invaded from the East. By the end of September, Poland fell, with its territory divided between the 2 powers.

In an attempt to eliminate the country’s spiritual and intellectual leadership, the Nazis soon began to deport or execute religious leaders and other educated elite, while sending other Poles to labor camps. With its sizeable Jewish population, Poland became a target of and location for some of the Nazi regime’s most horrific activities. Nazis murdered Jews in mass executions, while confining others to barbed wire-surrounded ghettos before shipping them by rail to extermination camps.

In sum, the Nazi occupation was devastating to Poland. An estimated 5.6 million Poles died, or roughly 16% of the total population and 97% of the Jewish population (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Several of Nazi Germany’s most notorious death and slave labor camps, such as Auschwitz-Birkenau (called Oświęcim in Polish) and Treblinka, were located in Poland. As part of its **Lebensraum** (“living space”) policy, Nazi Germany

tried to Germanize Poland's territory, replacing the deported or executed Poles with around 1 million German settlers.



Resistance: Immediately upon invasion, Poles mounted armed resistance. Their ***Armia Krajowa*** (Home Army or AK) became Europe's largest underground Army during WWII with

approximately 400,000 members. Supported by the Polish government-in-exile in London, resistance coordinated by the AK flared in ghettos and camps across the country. Polish troops also fought under the Allies in battles across the continent.

In June 1941, Germany turned on its former ally and attacked the USSR. Over the next 4 years, they fought a bitter war extending from Moscow to Berlin, with many of the battles taking place on Polish territory. Although they were technically allies from this point, the Polish government-in-exile and the USSR experienced strained relations through much of the war. The situation worsened after information concerning the atrocities committed by the Soviets against Poles in the early years of the war became public.

Katyń Massacre: As a consequence of its occupation of eastern Poland in 1940-41, the USSR captured some 1.6 million Poles and deported them to various labor camps located throughout the USSR. Later, the world learned that the USSR also carried out mass executions of some of these Polish prisoners. One notorious incident occurred in 1940 in the Katyń Forest near the present-day Russian city of Smolensk. There, the Soviet military and secret police executed and buried in mass graves some 21,000 members of the Polish educated elite such as military officers, judges, teachers, physicians, and lawyers. The USSR refused to claim responsibility for the massacre until 1992. The Katyń Massacre, as it was known, continues to color Polish-Russian relations today (see "Plane Crash at Smolensk" below).

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

By 1942, the Nazis had confined some 500,000 Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto, a section of the city the Nazis surrounded with barbed wire and later a wall. There, the Jews suffered appalling conditions, with thousands dying of starvation and disease monthly. In mid-1942, the Nazis began transferring ghetto inhabitants to the Treblinka death camp. By fall, just 55,000 Jews remained and deportations slowed. Resistance soon unified as the Jewish Fighting Organization (ŻOB), and when deportations resumed in January 1943, the ŻOB hid residents and organized fighting units, compelling the Nazis to withdraw. In April, Jews armed with whatever weapons they could find attacked, destroying tanks and killing troops. The ŻOB managed to hold off the Nazis for almost a month. By mid-May, the Jews had little ammunition left, and rather than be captured, many fighters took their own lives. Upon retaking the ghetto, the Nazis deported the remaining inhabitants then dynamited Warsaw's Great Synagogue.

Warsaw Uprising: In 1943, the German Army began to retreat from Russia, and by 1944, the Soviets were advancing rapidly against the Germans. As the Soviets approached Warsaw in late summer, the Polish government-in-exile and the AK saw its chance, mounting a 2-month long uprising against the German occupiers. Expecting the Soviets to come to their aid, the Poles fought bitterly, yet the Soviets lent no support, prevented Allied planes from resupplying the AK, and even halted outside the city to observe the fighting, which resulted in the deaths of some 200,000 civilians and 15,000 combatants. Forced to retreat in the face of the Soviet threat, the Germans razed the city as they departed, reducing it to rubble. When the Soviets officially liberated Warsaw in 1945, they found it largely abandoned.

Postwar Settlements and Population Movements: Even before war's end, the USSR maneuvered to control postwar Poland's path, jailing or executing resistance leaders. The USSR further established its own pro-communist Polish Committee of National Liberation in Moscow in competition to the Polish government-in-exile in London. At the February 1945 Yalta Conference, the Allies set Poland's eastern border along the 1939 Nazi Germany-USSR demarcation and agreed that postwar Poland would remain within the Soviet sphere of influence. Despite the Allies' agreement to create a provisional Polish government together, the USSR installed its own pro-communist provisional government in Warsaw. Following the war's end, the Potsdam Conference in late summer 1945 moved Poland's western border about 120 mi west, granting Poland



German-majority territories that it had not held since the Middle Ages.

These boundary changes set Poland's modern-day borders in an area 20% smaller than prewar Poland. They also

compelled population transfers of perhaps more than 10 million people including Poles and Germans but also Lithuanians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians, among others across Eastern and Central Europe. Some of these transfers were involuntary – the Soviets expelled Germans and Ukrainians from Poland, while forcibly relocating Poles from Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania to Poland. As a result, Poland largely lost its ethnic diversity (see *Political and Social Relations*).

The People's Republic of Poland

Although they had pledged to allow free elections, the Soviet occupiers moved quickly to suppress opposition parties and dissidents, and restrict Poles' rights. In 1947, Soviet-backed candidates won 417 of 434 seats in the *Sejm* as Bolesław Bierut, a staunch communist and Soviet ally, assumed the Presidency.

Over the next 2 years, Bierut and the communists consolidated power through the Polish United Worker's Party (PZPR). In 1952, Poland adopted a Soviet-style Constitution and became the People's Republic of Poland.

During the late 1940s-early 1950s, the PZPR-controlled government oversaw postwar reconstruction. Following the USSR's Stalinist model, Poland nationalized all commercial enterprises, pursued limited agricultural collectivization, and promoted heavy industry. To strengthen its position, the PZPR sought to undermine the legitimacy of the Roman Catholic Church, which nevertheless remained an important element of Polish identity and provided a continuing source of resistance to communism over the years (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Reform and Unrest under Gomułka

After Soviet leader Stalin's 1953 death, the Polish government instituted reforms. Following Bierut's unexpected 1956 death, a massive workers' strike in Poznań demanding "bread and freedom" rocked the country and was suppressed violently. Although the USSR threatened to invade if Władysław Gomułka became the new PZPR leader, Gomułka persuaded the Soviets to desist, earning him popular support. Gomułka led Poland's government for the next 14 years.



In the early period, his regime undertook reforms, such as freeing political prisoners, reprivatizing collectivized farmland, and improving relations with the Catholic Church. Gradually, however, he became increasingly authoritarian, and reforms slowed. By the 1960s, the PZPR had limited the activities of the Church and repressed intellectual life. Gomułka lost further popularity in 1968 when police violently suppressed student demonstrations, as Poland provided troops for the Soviet invasion of neighboring Czechoslovakia with the intent of suppressing a protest movement there. When Gomułka announced food price increases in 1970, strikes erupted at several shipyards. Authorities quelled the protests with force, resulting in 44 deaths. Shortly thereafter, Gomułka resigned.

Reform and Unrest under Gierek

As PZPR chief over the next 10 years, Edward Gierek attempted to stimulate the economy by borrowing from the West. The move was initially successful, and Poland's standard of living improved somewhat. Yet the 1973 worldwide oil crisis and internal economic mismanagement caused a severe economic downturn. Rising prices and shortages of goods stoked public unrest. Further, government-proposed constitutional amendments cementing Poland's ties with the USSR and limiting citizens' rights were unpopular.

Additional price increases in 1976 led to worker strikes that were again brutally suppressed. By the late 1970s, Gierek faced strong opposition from workers, intellectuals, and the Catholic Church. The Church's influence grew substantially after the 1978 election of the Archbishop of Kraków as Pope John Paul II (see p. 6 of *Religion and Spirituality*). The pope's 1979 visit to Poland was especially inspirational to Poles seeking national, patriotic, and ethical leadership.

In response to additional food price increases in 1980, workers around the country went on strike, paralyzing shipyards and mines. Nonviolent demonstrations at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk were led by Lech Wałęsa. Unlike previous episodes of unrest, these worker strikes inspired protest across the Soviet bloc and result in permanent change in Poland.



After prolonged negotiations, the government signed the Gdańsk Agreement acceding to the strikers' demand to organize

independent trade unions. Workers' delegations subsequently formed **Solidarność** ("Solidarity"), a nationwide, independent, self-governing trade union with Wałęsa as its leader. Over time, Solidarity grew to include around 60% of the Polish workforce and 1/4 of the entire population. Wałęsa quickly became the international symbol of democratic movements across Eastern Europe.

Solidarity and the Gradual Collapse of Communism

Threatened by Solidarity's popularity, the PZPR removed Gierek from office. Yet Gierek's replacement lasted just slightly more than a year before continuing social unrest compelled the PZPR to install General Wojciech Jaruzelski as PZPR leader, Prime Minister (PM), and commander-in-chief of the armed forces in 1981. With the support of the USSR and Poland's communist hardliners, Jaruzelski withdrew official recognition of Solidarity, declared martial law, and arrested most of the Solidarity leadership, including Wałęsa. While these moves effectively hobbled Solidarity, they did nothing to help Poland's worsening economic situation or reverse workers' hostility toward the government.

Convinced he had slowed Solidarity's momentum, Jaruzelski released Wałęsa in 1982 and lifted martial law a year later. Meanwhile, the economic crisis worsened, with the population suffering under food scarcity and rationing. Still outlawed, Solidarity was operating underground when Wałęsa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in late 1983, bringing worldwide attention to the Polish workers' cause.



An Opening: Beginning in 1985, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev introduced reforms known as **perestroika** (restructuring) and **glasnost** (openness) that would eventually result in the dissolution of the USSR. Although the attempted reforms were largely unsuccessful, they signaled that the era of Soviet intervention in its satellite countries was over, sparking democratic movements across Eastern Europe.

Consequently, Jaruzelski initiated his own reforms, yet renewed strikes in 1988 compelled him to engage with Solidarity and other opposition movements. Subsequent roundtable negotiations led by the Catholic Church resulted in the legal recognition of Solidarity and its right to submit candidates for elected office. This “negotiated revolution” marked the end of communism in Poland.

Post-communist Poland

In June 1989, Poland held “semi-free” parliamentary elections (meaning the communists were guaranteed a certain number of seats). Solidarity candidates won nearly all the races they contested, and although Jaruzelski retained the office of President, a non-communist took office as PM. In 1990 presidential elections, Solidarity leader Wałęsa won easily, becoming Poland’s first non-communist President.

That year, the new Polish government initiated a “shock therapy” program intended to rapidly transition Poland’s economy from a centrally-planned communist system to a free market. Although the program initially led to some economic instabilities and



widespread economic hardships, it was ultimately successful (see *Economy and Resources*).

After the PZPR disbanded in 1990, some of its members regrouped to form the Social Democratic Party (SLD). Meanwhile, Solidarity experienced significant internal strife, causing government instability during Wałęsa’s 5-year tenure as President, with frequent PM changes. In 1993

parliamentary elections, the SLD and its allies won the majority of legislative seats. In the 1995 presidential election, former PZPR member and SLD candidate Aleksander Kwaśniewski narrowly defeated Wałęsa. A popular leader, Kwaśniewski oversaw passage of a new Constitution in 1997 and won re-election in 2000. His SLD coalition also managed to stay in power in Parliament until 2005, providing the country with a measure of political stability.

Contemporary Poland

In the 2005 elections, the conservative, nationalist, and strongly anti-corruption Law and Justice (PiS) party prevailed over the SLD. PiS founders, identical twin brothers Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński took office as President and PM, respectively. Forced

to abandon their coalition partners due to scandal, PiS called an early parliamentary election in 2007. Unexpectedly, PiS lost to the center-right Civic Platform (PO), and the PO's leader Donald Tusk replaced Jarosław Kaczyński as PM.

Plane Crash at Smolensk: In 2010, a plane carrying President Lech Kaczyński, his wife, and prominent Polish government, military, and civilian leaders crashed in Russia, killing all onboard. Compounding the tragedy, the Polish delegation had been traveling to Smolensk to attend a memorial service marking the 70th anniversary of the Katyń Massacre. The event provoked widespread mourning in Poland. Though some suspected foul play, subsequent investigations revealed the crash was due to pilot error.



Interim President Bronisław Komorowski of PO narrowly defeated Jarosław Kaczyński in a special election to fill the office left vacant by Lech Kaczyński's death. Rewarding PO for a strong economy, voters returned that party to power in the 2011 parliamentary elections, making Tusk the first PM since the end of communism to serve consecutive terms.

Since then, PO has been rocked by several corruption scandals as nationalist, conservative, and far-right groups have expanded. Riding a growing nationalist sentiment, PiS leader Andrzej Duda narrowly won the Presidency in 2015 elections, dashing Komorowski's hopes for a second term. In the parliamentary elections later that year, PiS won a majority in the *Sejm*. PiS member Beata Szydło was then PM until unexpectedly resigning in late 2017 to be replaced by Mateusz Morawiecki (see *Political and Social Relations*).

Since coming to power, PiS has distanced itself from the European Union (EU), which Poland joined in 2004, and cultivated relations with some far-right groups while taking steps towards authoritarianism (see *Political and Social Relations*). Several recent PiS reform efforts have generated significant

public outcry and rebuke from the EU that claims these reforms threaten judicial independence, the rule of law, and democracy itself. Although he no longer holds an elected office, PiS founder Jarosław Kaczyński remains the driving force behind the party and a very influential figure in Polish society (see *Political and Social Relations*).

Myth Overview

In contrast to history, which is supposed to be an objective record of the past based on verifiable facts, myths embody a culture's values and often explain the origins of humans and the natural world. Myths are important because they provide a sense of unique heritage and identity.

The Legend of Lech, Czech, and Rus

This legend relates the origins of 3 Slavic peoples, the Poles (or Lechites), Czechs, and the Rus (Russians) and was recorded in the late 13th-century ***Kronika Wielkopolska*** or *Chronicle of Greater Poland*.

According to the legend, 3 brothers named Lech, Czech, and Rus left their homeland for a hunting trip. Because each brother followed different prey, they were soon separated. While Rus headed east and settled in the steppe, Czech turned west where he chose to remain in the Bohemian hills. The 3rd brother, Lech, continued north until he came to a beautiful land with clear water.

While hunting, Lech followed the track of his arrow and came face-to-face with a fierce but beautiful white eagle perching on the limb of an oak tree and guarding its nest. As the eagle took flight and soared into the sky, the red light of the setting sun glinted on the tips of the eagle's wings. Believing this was a good omen, Lech declared that he and his tribe would remain at that place. The resulting settlement of Gniezno ("eagle's nest") became Poland's first capital. Throughout Poland's history, both the eagle imagery and the white and red colors mentioned in the myth have been incorporated into Poland's flag and coat of arms.



2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

Official Name

Republic of Poland

Rzeczpospolita Polska

Political Borders

Russia: 130 mi

Lithuania: 65 mi

Belarus: 260 mi

Ukraine: 332 mi

Slovakia: 336 mi

Czech Republic: 495 mi

Germany: 290 mi

Coastline: 273 mi

Capital

Warsaw



Demographics

Poland has a population of about 38.75 million, making it the sixth most populous member of the European Union (EU). Significantly, Poland's population is declining at an annual rate of -1%, in part due to low birth rates (see *Sex and Gender*) and emigration prompted by Poles' search for employment and education opportunities abroad. About 60% of the population lives in metropolitan areas, concentrating in and around the capital city of Warsaw, the southern region surrounding Kraków, and along Poland's northern coast.



Flag

Officially adopted in 1919, the Polish flag consists of 2 equal horizontal white

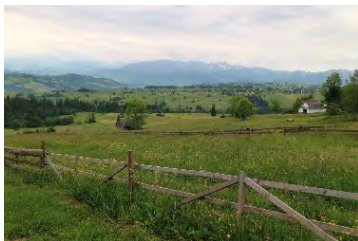
and red stripes. The flag's colors derive from the Polish coat of arms. According to myth, Poland's first king encountered a white eagle while hunting and incorporated the imagery into the royal coat of arms (see *History and Myth*).

Geography

Located in Central Europe (Eastern Europe by some sources), Poland shares a border with Russia (the enclave of Kaliningrad) to the North, Lithuania to the Northeast, Belarus and Ukraine to the East, Slovakia to the South, Czech Republic to the Southwest, and Germany to the West. Poland's long northern coastline faces the Baltic Sea. Poland's total land area is about 117,500 sq mi, making it slightly smaller than New Mexico and about the same size as Italy.

Poland has low, mostly flat terrain. Coastal lowlands along the northern Baltic shoreline eventually give way to rolling plains in Poland's center and hilly uplands in the East. Mountains rise along Poland's southern border, where the nation's highest point, located in the Tatry Mountains, reaches about 8,199 ft.

Forests cover about 31% of Poland, while rich, fertile land and pastures stretch across nearly 1/2 of the country. Poland's 2 longest rivers, the Vistula and the Oder, flow from the mountains in the South to the Baltic Sea in the



North. Several large Polish cities, including the capital city of Warsaw, Kraków, and Gdańsk, are situated along the Vistula. Poland's central location in Continental Europe, its flat terrain, and lack of natural barriers left it vulnerable to invasion by foreign armies throughout its history (see *History and Myth*).

Climate

Poland experiences a temperate continental climate with 4 distinct seasons. Summers tend to be short but warm, punctuated by frequent showers and thunderstorms. Temperatures in the summer month of July average 67°F. Winters are long, cold, cloudy, and wet, with temperatures in the winter month of January averaging 27°F. Generally, coastal regions experience warmer temperatures due to the warm Gulf Stream. Snowfall typically occurs November-March, while rainfall is heaviest May-August.

Natural Hazards

Poland is vulnerable to relatively few natural hazards. Harsh winters, characterized by heavy snowfall and cold temperatures, comprise the most significant hazards. The country also occasionally experiences flooding.

Environmental Issues

Rapid industrialization during Poland's communist era (see *History and Myth*) resulted in widespread environmental degradation such as significant water, soil, and air pollution. Damaging activities included deforestation, the improper disposal of industrial waste, and dumping of untreated sewage into groundwater reservoirs.

After the fall of communism in 1989, the Polish government curtailed development of heavy industries and enacted measures to reduce environmental degradation. Nevertheless,



environmental issues continue to plague Poland today. For example, emissions from coal-fired power plants cause air pollution and intermittently result in acid rain, which in turn damages Poland's forests. Moreover,

while the government regulates agricultural runoff and disposal of industrial and hazardous waste, harmful byproducts continue to pollute municipal water sources across the country. Air pollution from automobile emissions is a concern in most major cities.

Government

Poland is a constitutional republic with a parliamentary government. The country divides into 16 provinces (**województwa**), administered by governors and elected local councils. Adopted in 1997 (see *History and Myth*), Poland's Constitution separates power among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches while outlining the fundamental rights of freedom of speech, press, and religion for Polish citizens.

Executive Branch

The President, who is head-of-state and commander-in-chief of Poland's Armed Forces, is elected by popular vote and may serve up to 2 consecutive 5-year terms. Although the President's powers are largely ceremonial, the President is responsible for making governmental appointments and representing Poland abroad. In addition, the President retains the power to influence and veto proposed legislation, but the Parliament (see "Legislative Branch" below) may overturn a veto with a 3/5 majority vote.

The current President, Andrzej Duda, took office in 2015. Karol Nawrocki, who won the 2025 presidential election will succeed Duda in August of 2025.



Executive power is vested in the Prime Minister (PM), who is head-of-government. With the support of a Council of Ministers, the PM oversees the country's day-to-day affairs. Appointed by the President and approved by the Parliament, the PM is traditionally a member of the political party that holds the most seats in the Parliament. Poland's current PM, Donald Tusk, took office in December 2023.

Legislative Branch

Poland's legislature is a 2-chamber Parliament composed of a 100-seat Senate and a 460-seat **Sejm** or lower house. Senate members are directly elected in single-seat districts by a nationwide majority vote, while *Sejm* members are elected in multi-seat districts by a proportional representation vote. All Parliament members serve 4-year terms. The Parliament controls all federal legislative powers, including amending the Constitution, appointing positions in government, approving declarations of war, and passing the national budget.

Judicial Branch

The judiciary includes a Supreme Court (**Sąd Najwyższy**), a Constitutional Tribunal, State Tribunal, administrative courts,

and system of lower regional and appellate courts. As the highest court, the Supreme Court divides into civil, criminal, labor and social insurance, and military chambers and is the final court of appeal for civil, criminal, and military cases. A 25-member National Judiciary Council nominates and the President approves the Supreme Court justices to serve until retirement at age 65, though justices can extend their tenure.

In mid-2018, amid an increasingly authoritative political environment (see “Political Climate” below), the government



carried out a sweeping purge of the Supreme Court, forcing 27 justices to retire, including the top judge. The move incited large-scale protests, with critics charging that the ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS – see “Political Climate”

below) was attempting to take over Poland’s justice system. The move also drew complaints from international observers who claim this and other PiS steps to control the judicial system threaten the rule of law and democratic standards.

Political Climate

Poland’s political landscape includes a multi-party system in which political parties or coalitions of parties compete for power. Generally, those parties and coalitions which hold the majority of seats in the Parliament also hold the bulk of government leadership positions. Ruling parties and coalitions tend to dissolve frequently, resulting in infighting and numerous changes in government leadership. For example, the office of the PM and membership in the Council of Ministers change often. Since 1991, Poland has had 17 PMs, with the most recent assuming power in December 2023. By contrast, Poland has had just 5 Presidents during the same period.

While the government generally allows political parties to operate without restriction, parties must win at least 5% of the

national vote to gain representation in the *Sejm*. Special-interest minority groups, such as the ethnic German minority (see “Ethnic Groups” below), are exempt from this rule. Poland’s current government is controlled by the conservative, far-right PiS led by the politically influential former PM and PiS founder Jarosław Kaczyński (see *History and Myth*). Rising to power amid a recent growth in social conservatism and nationalist movements, PiS swept the 2015 Parliamentary elections to become the first single party to gain an outright majority in the *Sejm* since the 1989 fall of communism. Over the last several years, PiS has promoted an increasingly authoritarian political agenda seeking to reform Poland’s social, political, and economic spheres and increase the influence of the Catholic Church in Polish society (see *Religion and Spirituality*).



Although popular among Polish conservatives, PiS sparks heated and polarizing public debate among moderate political and civil society groups. PiS’s attempt to pass an abortion ban in late 2016 (see *Sex and Gender*) was especially controversial, sparking mass protests throughout Poland. Although the government ultimately withdrew the ban, PiS has recently taken other authoritarian measures to curtail reproductive rights, regulate freedom of speech and assembly, tighten control over state media, and limit judicial independence.



Supporters argue PiS’s actions represent a broader desire among Poles to return to traditional Catholic values they believe will preserve the Polish nation. Conversely, opposition groups

accuse the government of subverting democracy. Among PiS's critics, the most prominent and vocal is the center-right Civic Platform (PO) party, which led Poland's government from 2007-15 (see *History and Myth*) and is currently the second-largest party in the *Sejm*. In 2014-2019, prominent PO member and current PM Donald Tusk served two terms as President of the European Council, the body responsible for setting the EU's political direction and priorities.

Despite recent efforts by PiS to curb historically widespread corruption, bribery and other corrupt practices continue to permeate the government, aggravating political tensions, engendering public distrust of officials, and making many Poles skeptical of the political process.

Defense

The Polish Armed Forces (PAF) are a unified military force consisting of primarily ground forces with smaller maritime and air branches, having a joint strength of 164,100 active-duty troops and



75,400 paramilitary troops. They are charged with defending against foreign and domestic threats, performing search and rescue operations, and protecting critical infrastructure.

Poland relies on its allies to respond to larger, state-level threats, receiving the majority of military support from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) – a political and military alliance among 32 nations (including the US) that promotes its members' security through collective defense. Poland implemented a significant military modernization plan, which includes acquiring F-35As with first in-country deliveries expected by 2026. Poland also has contracts for new armored vehicles from South Korea and the US.

Army: The Polish Army is a well-equipped, well-trained force of 90,600 active-duty troops consisting of 11 maneuver regiments, divisions, and brigades (including reconnaissance, armored,

mechanized, and air maneuver), 6 combat support regiments, a helicopter brigade, and 4 air defense regiments.

Air Force: The Polish Air Force consists of 18,850 active-duty personnel and has 2 fighter squadrons, 3 fighter/ground attack squadrons, 2 fighter/ground attack/ISR squadrons, 2 transport squadrons, 2 training squadrons, a search and rescue squadron, 2 transport helicopter squadrons, an uninhabited aerial vehicle (UAV) squadron, and an air defense brigade. The Air Force is equipped with 88 combat capable aircraft and 73 helicopters.



Navy: Consisting of 6,450 active-duty personnel, the Polish Navy is the smallest of the branches, with 1 tactical submarine, 2 principal surface combatants, 5 patrol and coastal combatants, 21 mine warfare and countermeasures vessels, 8 amphibious ships and craft, and 26 logistics and support vessels.

The Polish Navy also comprises a Naval Aviation unit staffed with 1,300 active-duty personnel divided into 2 anti-submarine warfare and search and rescue squadrons, and 2 transport squadrons.

Special Forces: Comprised of 3,400 active-duty personnel, the Polish Special Forces divide into 3 Special Forces units, a combat support unit, and a combat service support unit.



Paramilitary: The Polish Paramilitary forces consist of 14,300 Border Guards,

including 2,000 Maritime Border Guards, and 60,900 Prevention Unit (Police) members.

Polish Air Force Rank Insignia



General



Lieutenant
General



Major
General



Brigadier
General



Colonel



Lieutenant
Colonel



Major



Captain



Lieutenant



Second
Lieutenant



Chief
Warrant
Officer



Warrant
Officer
Class I



Warrant
Officer
Class II



Junior
Warrant
Officer



Sergeant
Class I



Sergeant
Class II



Master
Corporal



Chief
Corporal



Corporal



Lance
Corporal



Private

Foreign Relations

Following the end of the communist era in 1989, Poland diverged from Russian influence to pursue political, economic, and military integration with its Western European neighbors, joining NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004. Recently, amid an increasingly nationalistic and isolationist political environment, Poland has somewhat distanced itself from its Western European allies, causing some regional tension.

International Cooperation: As a NATO member, Poland regularly participates in and hosts NATO military exercises, notably holding the annual NATO Summit in Warsaw in 2016. Moreover, in 2017 Poland allowed NATO to permanently station troops along Poland's northern border with the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad. Poland recently constructed a NATO ballistic-missile-defense (BMD) system, which became operational in December 2023. Now completed, the BMD will further enhance NATO operability in the region and help deter a recently aggressive Russia (see "Security Issues" below).

In addition to actively participating in NATO, Poland closely cooperates regionally with its Baltic, Nordic, and Central European neighbors on a number of common political, economic, and social issues. For example, Poland joined with Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic in 1991 to form the Visegrad Group, a political and cultural alliance intended to advance



military, economic, social, and energy cooperation among its 4 members. Poland is also a member of numerous other international organizations, including the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization.

Relations with the EU: The EU is a political and economic partnership among 27 nations located in Europe. Poland enjoys lucrative trade ties with the EU and relies on the partnership as a political and military buffer against external security threats. Since the 2015 emergence of Poland's right-wing, nationalist government, EU-Poland relations have become somewhat strained. Specifically, the EU views Poland's recent efforts to restructure the judiciary (see "Judicial Branch" above) and control state media as subversive to democracy and the rule of law.

Moreover, as Europe's migrant crises continues (see "Security Issues" below), Poland's reluctance to accept refugees despite a mandatory EU relocation plan has deepened the diplomatic rift. Amid these tensions, EU leaders have publicly reproached Poland, threatening economic sanctions, fines, and other penalties.

Relations with the US: Although the US and Poland first established diplomatic ties in 1919, bilateral relations severed at the onset of World War II (WWII) (see *History and Myth*) and subsequently remained strained for nearly 5 decades during Poland's communist era. After Poland emerged from communist rule in 1989, the 2 nations soon reestablished bilateral ties, with the US supporting the new Polish government in its efforts to build a free market economy, democratic institutions, and civil society. The US strongly advocated for Poland's entry into

NATO in 1999 and promoted Poland's 2004 bid to join the EU.

In recent years, Poland has emerged as an important regional security partner for the US, cooperating on

issues such as nonproliferation, energy security, missile defense, counter-terrorism, protection of human rights, and promotion of democracy in the region. Poland has participated



in US and NATO-led operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Most recently, Poland has delivered significant contributions to operations to counter the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as Daesh, ISIL, and IS) – a notoriously brutal militant Islamist group.

The US provides substantial defense assistance to Poland, providing military training and equipment to bolster Polish military capability and interoperability with US and NATO forces. In 2024, for example, over 10,000 US military personnel participated in various military exercises in Poland. In addition to close military ties, the 2 nations share lucrative trade relations. The US is Poland's principal investor outside the EU. Moreover, the US and Poland have signed several bilateral trade and investment agreements promoting US-Polish joint ventures and allowing goods, services, and capital to move more freely between the 2 nations.

Security Issues

Poland's security environment is largely dominated by its historically volatile relationship with Russia, although Europe's recent migrant crisis has intensified security concerns. Poland relies heavily on military and economic support from NATO, the US, the EU, and other allies to help insulate it from large, external threats, notably a recently aggressive Russia.



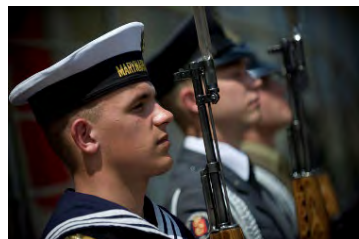
Migrant Crisis: Political unrest in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and war in Ukraine has compelled thousands of refugees and migrants to flee into Northern and Western Europe. As of June 2024, Poland had nearly 1 million Ukrainian refugees. Seeking to alleviate pressure on Greece and Italy, 2 nations disproportionately affected by the migrant crisis, the EU adopted a mandatory relocation plan in 2015 requiring EU member states to absorb a portion of the asylum-seekers. While Poland initially

agreed to take in about 6,200 refugees, in late 2015, the Polish government rejected the quota, citing security concerns after several Islamist terrorists carried out damaging attacks in France. Since then, Poland's refusal to accept migrants has inflamed intra-EU relations, with some Western European nations accusing Poland of failing to fulfill its share of the economic and social burden of the ongoing crisis.

Relations with Russia: Poland and Russia share historically tense relations (see *History and Myth*). Polish leaders generally view Russian intentions in the region with suspicion and wariness. Bilateral friction escalated in 2014 following Russia's occupation of Crimea and again in 2022 with the Russian government's invasion of Ukraine. Poland vocally advocated for harsh EU sanctions against Russia in 2014 and again in 2022. The 2014 sanctions consequently evoked equally harsh Russian retaliatory sanctions against Poland which damaged Poland's

economy and further soured relations between the 2 nations.

Tensions since then have remained high. Amid continuing unrest in Eastern Ukraine and the bolstering of Russian military capacity in neighboring



Kaliningrad, Poland has requested and received enhanced support from NATO, such as an increase in the number of NATO troops permanently stationed within Poland. International observers worry the increase in NATO military presence will further deepen regional tensions.

Poland's significant reliance on trade with Russia (see *Economics and Resources* and *Technology and Materials*) leaves the former nation particularly vulnerable to economic disruptions from Russia. To reduce dependence on Russian imports, Poland has advocated for closer energy and economic integration with Western Europe. Russia's refusal to acknowledge humanitarian abuses committed during the communist era also contributes to bilateral tensions.

Ethnic Groups

Modern Poland is one of the most ethnically homogenous countries in Europe, with 99% of Polish citizens identifying as ethnic Poles. As late as WWII, Poland had a relatively diverse population due to its history of shifting borders and religious tolerance. Nevertheless, Nazi genocide during WWII combined with anti-Semitism and population transfers after the war drastically reduced Poland's once-thriving minority communities of Jews, Germans, and Ukrainians (see *Religion and Spirituality* and *History and Myth*).

Under the 2005 Law on National and Ethnic Minorities and Regional Language, Poland recognizes 14 minorities, consisting mostly of small populations numbering in the mere 1,000s. Of those, 9 ethnic minorities are based on nationality, the largest being Ukrainian (0.2% of the total population), German (0.1%) and Belarusian (0.01%). Other national minorities include Czech, Lithuanian, Armenian, Russian, Slovak, and Jewish.

Poland also recognizes 4 stateless ethnic minorities. These include the Lipka Tatars, numbering around 3,000; descendants of Central Asian Tatars who settled in the region centuries ago (see *Religion and Spirituality*); and the Crimean Jewish Karaim

(also called Karaites), who number around 17,156. Other groups include the Lemkos, originally mountain shepherds and numbering around 8,088, and about 13,303 Roma or "Gypsies" who live primarily on urban outskirts.



Silesians, a loosely-defined group with Polish and German characteristics, populates a region now divided among Poland, Germany, and the Czech Republic and constitute the largest ethnic minority in Poland at 1.6% of the population. Some Silesians have

attempted to register as a national minority or have sought autonomy from the Polish state, yet Poland refuses them official minority status. Some Poles claim 2 or more ethnic identities.

Social Relations

While post-war population movements and decades of communist centralization erased most ethnic distinctions among Poles, some regional linguistic and cultural differences remain. For example, a slight variation in dialect separates Kashubians in northern Poland from the rest of the population (see *Language and Communication*). Similarly, some Poles stereotype residents of the Central-West as being preoccupied with high-tech economic advancement.

Historically, Poles lived in primarily rural, agricultural communities where members relied on family and social networks, such as those of the Catholic Church, to meet their physical and spiritual needs. Government-mandated urbanization and industrialization during the communist era triggered various socio-economic changes that fundamentally altered Polish society. Nevertheless, traditional relationships and the influence of the Catholic Church retained their importance during the nearly 5 decades of communist rule (see *History and Myth* and *Religion and Spirituality*). Family and social networks became important sources of goods, services, and ideas for many Poles who viewed government-controlled communist organizations as corrupt, ineffective, and untrustworthy.



Today, Polish society divides along rural-urban, male-female, and rich-poor lines. Generally, urban dwellers, males, and the wealthy enjoy greater access to educational and economic opportunities and hold the most social prestige. Women are more likely victims of domestic violence and discrimination in the workplace (see *Sex and Gender*). Polish society is also marked by generational divides. Older generations remain cautious towards the government and skeptical of the free market economic system. This tendency is particularly true of older,

well-educated Poles whom the communist system supported but have since lost economic protections under the free market system.



By contrast, younger generations have generally embraced a more optimistic outlook toward recent political

and economic changes. They generally prefer urban life and technological innovations. Nevertheless, due to high unemployment (see *Economics and Resources*), Polish youth are more likely to emigrate to other EU nations in search of better opportunities, causing concerns that Poland is losing a generation of talented and entrepreneurial youth.

While minorities are generally integrated within Polish society, many still maintain pride in their ethnic heritage and take advantage of special rights offered to them. Minorities have established approximately 200 ethnic organizations since gaining freedom of association in 1989, and minority political parties receive special consideration for election to the *Sejm*. Legally-recognized minorities also have the right to study and teach their language in areas where minority groups comprise 20% or more of the population (see *Learning and Knowledge*).

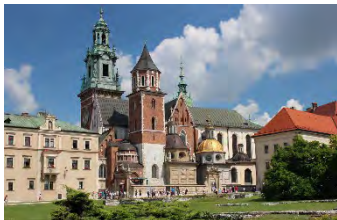
Nevertheless, some ethnic minorities face discrimination and socio-economic exclusion. For example, the Roma continue to endure negative social stereotypes, employment discrimination, and harassment by far-right groups despite various attempts by the Polish government to integrate them.



3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Overview

According to a 2022 estimate, 85% of the population is Roman Catholic. Other groups such as atheists, those who claim no religious affiliation, and other Christians (Jehovah's Witnesses, Greek Catholics, Evangelical Lutherans, Polish Orthodox, and Pentecostals) comprise less than 15% of the population. Followers of other traditions such as Judaism and Islam, number in the 1,000s.



Poland's Constitution protects freedom of religion and recognizes no state religion. While the law allows individuals to worship, teach, and practice in both private and public spheres according to their personal beliefs, it limits the activities of religious groups that infringe on the rights of others or disrupt public order, state security, or morality. Poland presently recognizes 184 registered religious groups, including the Roman Catholic Church, Polish Orthodox Church, Methodist Church, Pentecostal Church, Muslim Religious Union, and the Union of Jewish Communities, among others. All registered groups enjoy equal protection and rights under the law, including the right to erect places of worship, teach religion in public or private schools, and officiate at marriages. Yet the Catholic Church receives some special privileges and has especially close ties with the Polish government.

Poland's Early Spiritual Landscape

Many of the region's early inhabitants practiced a variety of indigenous religions that worshiped multiple deities and objects, such as the sun, moon, and mountains. Other groups practiced animism, the belief that the spirit of life or consciousness resides in all natural animate and inanimate objects, such as trees, rocks, hills, fields, and animals.

The Arrival and Spread of Christianity

Missionaries from neighboring Bohemia first brought Christianity to Poland in the 10th century. Converting primarily for political reasons, Polish leader Mieszko I adopted Roman Catholicism as his Kingdom's official religion in 966. In accepting Christianity directly from the Pope, the leader of the Catholic Church in Rome, Mieszko gained official acknowledgement of his Kingdom and was able to avoid conquest by neighboring German crusaders (see *History and Myth*). His conversion also helped to



justify conquest and consolidation of the pagan tribes within his territory (see *History and Myth*).

While few Poles initially followed Mieszko's lead in converting, over the next 2 centuries, Polish rulers

gradually suppressed indigenous traditions. They specifically prohibited certain elements of pagan religions, imposed Catholic rites and rituals, and initiated compulsory contributions to the Church. By the mid-12th century, much of the population had converted to Roman Catholic Christianity which subsequently took firm root.

As Poland acquired new territory in the 13th-15th centuries, its population became more diverse. For example, most of the inhabitants of newly-conquered eastern lands were members of the Russian Orthodox Church. Meanwhile, Jews had been arriving since as early as the 11th century and continued to immigrate in large numbers in subsequent centuries. Although officially Catholic, Poland was Europe's most tolerant state during this period, allowing Orthodox monasteries, Jewish synagogues, and Muslim mosques to coexist peacefully with Roman Catholic institutions.

The Protestant Reformation and Counter-Reformation

The Protestant Reformation began in the early 16th century to answer a call for change in the Roman Catholic Church. A key

event in the movement occurred when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to a church door in Germany in 1517. Critical of several Catholic Church teachings and the authority of the pope, Luther's ideas spread quickly, especially through the use of the newly-invented printing press.

Within Poland, Protestantism initially found support among noble families. Yet the Catholic Church soon mounted its own "Counter-Reformation," enacting reforms to re-convert areas influenced by the Protestants. During this time, the Catholic Church neither expelled nor persecuted Protestants but instead pursued peaceful methods to regain its membership. Among other initiatives, the Church restructured priestly training and elements of religious life, while Jesuit monks opened schools and proselytized across Poland.

In contrast to most other European states, Poland demonstrated significant religious tolerance in the 16th century (see *History and Myth*), welcoming groups seeking economic stability or fleeing persecution elsewhere in Europe. These groups included Jews, Muslim Tatars, French Huguenots (Protestants), and Bohemian Protestants.

As a consequence of the Counter-Reformation, Protestantism did not take root, as pro-Catholic and anti-Protestant fervor swept Poland in the mid-17th century. Subsequent conflicts with Protestant Swedes, Orthodox Russians, and Muslim Turks and Tatars worked to strengthen the connection between Polish identity and Roman Catholicism and decrease religious toleration. Through the 18th century, Catholicism flourished. Monastic orders became increasingly influential in Polish culture, economy, and education. Prominent in both political and social life, Catholicism also continued to strengthen its connection to Polish national identity.



Jewish Life in Poland

During the medieval period, Poland's Jewish population grew steadily to comprise the world's largest Jewish community by the 16th century (see *History and Myth*). Scholars estimate that nearly 80% of the world's Jews resided in Poland at this time, enjoying autonomy and relative peace. Through the 18th century, Poland was home to a vibrant Jewish culture, with Jews occupying many leading positions in society as craftsmen, physicians, scientists, and bankers. Although the Jewish community suffered under the 19th-century occupations, Jews made up nearly 25% of Kraków's population, 33% of Warsaw's, and up to 90% of the population of many small towns as World War II began.

Religion under Foreign Rule

Prussia, Austria, and Russia had partitioned Poland by the end of the 18th century (see *History and Myth*). Resentful of their lack of freedom and the repression of their culture and language, most Poles remained faithful Catholics. Over the next 123 years of foreign occupation, the Catholic Church cemented its connection to Polish identity, working to safeguard Polish religious and literary traditions while shaping social, political, and intellectual life.

During the 19th century, Polish rebellions provoked harsh retaliations in Russian-controlled regions (see *History and Myth*). To support and promote the country's Russification, the government banned new construction of Catholic churches, converted others to Orthodox worship, closed Catholic monasteries, and deported clergy. Despite this oppression, Catholicism remained popular.

Poland's Jews lost their historic legal protections under partition. Anti-Semitism spiked in the late 19th century and early 20th centuries, when some Jewish communities experienced **pogroms** (attacks).

World War II (WWII)

Poland's Christian community experienced significant losses during WWII, when many clergy fled as refugees or were deported to Soviet labor camps (see *History and Myth*). While significant, these losses pale in comparison to the staggering trauma experienced by Poland's Jewish community under the Nazi regime (see *History and Myth*).

Just before WWII, Jews comprised about 10% of Poland's population or about 3 million people. When WWII began with Nazi Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939, some Jews in Poland fled to neighboring countries, though others remained, unable to escape or unwilling to leave their homes and relatives. Over the course of their almost 6-year occupation of Poland, the Nazis confined Jews to ghettos, murdered them outright in mass



shootings, shipped them to labor camps, or exterminated them in concentration camps. Some of the war's most notorious and horrific concentration camps were located in Poland. For example, Auschwitz-Birkenau,

west of Kraków, was the site of the murder of nearly 1.5 million Jews, Roma, and other "undesirables," as well as those who opposed the Nazi regime (see *History and Myth*). By the war's end in 1945, the Nazis had exterminated some 97% of Poland's Jews.

Religion during the Communist Period

At the conclusion of WWII, Poland came under the control of a Soviet-backed communist government (see *History and Myth*). The communists' atheistic worldview, or the disbelief in deities and the rejection of religion, brought significant changes to Poland's religious landscape.

For example, the communist government sought to dismantle the Catholic Church and other religious institutions by drastically restricting their activities. The state destroyed many churches,

mosques, and synagogues, while confiscating others to convert them for alternative uses. Moreover, the state dissolved seminaries, monasteries, and convents, banned religious literature, excluded religion from educational policy and curriculum, and executed, deported, or banned members of the Catholic clergy.

Despite this repression, many Poles continued their religious practices in secret, while maintaining a strong connection to the Catholic Church. Moreover, unlike in other communist states, the Catholic Church in Poland eventually regained some autonomy to become the only large institution beyond the state's control. Over the years, the Church became a symbol of moral integrity, Polish identity, and defense against communist repression.

Catholicism gained even more momentum in 1978, when the Polish Archbishop of Kraków, Karol Jozef Wojtyła, was elected to the papacy as Pope John Paul II. As the first non-Italian to assume the position since the 16th century, Pope John Paul II was a vocal opponent of communism and advocate of Polish nationalism, further popularizing the Catholic Church.

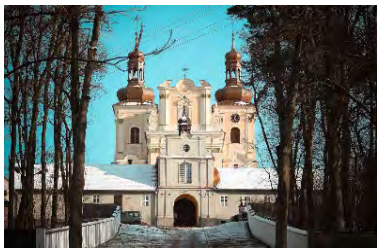


Other prominent Church leaders emerged as outspoken critics of the communist regime. The 1984 murder of activist priest Jerzy Popiełuszko by government agents was particularly effective in catalyzing political opposition movements (see p. 21 of *History and Myth*). After the 1989 fall of communism, freedom of religion was restored. Religious organizations resumed their range of educational and charitable activities as the Catholic Church enjoyed a surge of interest.

Religion Today

Roman Catholicism continues to be central to national identity. While Poland generally has a tolerant society free of religious

violence, a recent rise in conservative, right-wing political ideology (see *Political and Social Relations*) and associated anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim sentiment has caused some tension among religious groups.



Roman Catholicism:

Most of Poland's

Roman Catholics are ethnic Poles (see *Political and Social Relations*), and the Roman Catholic Church exerts significant influence in Polish society. Catholic institutions offer numerous social services, while public school curricula often include religious instruction (see *Learning and Knowledge*).

Despite constitutionally-mandated separation of church and state, the Catholic Church is quite active in politics. For example, the Church helps guide national legislative policy through the Joint Government-Episcopate Committee which regularly meets with governmental leaders to discuss social, political, and religious matters. Recently, the Church's conservative stance on issues such as contraception, abortion, and homosexuality and its role within an increasingly liberal society has triggered heated public debate.

Judaism: Following WWII, about 137,000 Jewish survivors chose to remain in or return to Poland, yet resettled Jewish communities often encountered lingering anti-Semitism. Facing hostility from the new communist government and discrimination from other Poles, many Jews, including prominent artists, academics, and scientists, eventually chose to leave Poland. By 1989, Poland's Jewish population comprised just 5,000 people.



Nevertheless, the Jewish community has grown some over the last 3 decades. Today, between some 17,000 Jews live in Poland, primarily in Warsaw. While still relatively small, the Jewish community has experienced a cultural revival. Warsaw and Kraków hold annual Jewish heritage festivals (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*), while Warsaw houses several

Jewish museums and institutions that draw thousands of visitors annually and serve as important educational centers of Jewish history and culture.

Notably, some tension exists between the Polish government and members of the Jewish community



predominantly concerning the claim process to compensate individuals for property lost during or after WWII. Moreover, right-wing hate groups and some politicians espouse anti-Semitic views, while some media outlets promote anti-Semitic and discriminatory content.

Islam: Muslim Tatars settled in Poland as early as the 13th century (see *History and Myth*). While they also suffered under years of foreign occupation and communist religious repression, some have retained their ethnic and religious identity. Today, Poland is home to about 18,500 Muslims, though only about 10% of this group are ethnically Tatar. Most of Poland's Muslims are migrants and temporary workers from the Middle East and Africa.

Poland has experienced a recent rise in anti-Muslim sentiment, incited in part by Europe's ongoing migrant crisis (see *Political and Social Relations*). Groups in several communities, notably Warsaw, Łódź, and towns in the rural Northeast, have organized anti-immigrant marches featuring anti-Muslim slogans and banners. Moreover, a 2019 poll indicated that about 45% of the Polish population hold negative views of Muslims.

4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

Overview

The family is the basis of Polish society. Poles typically maintain close ties with both their immediate and extended family members, sharing good fortune with their relations and involving them in family decisions.

Residence

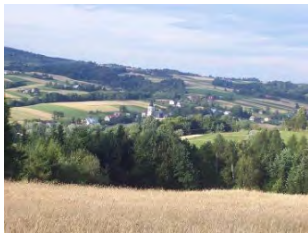
At the end of World War II (WWII), nearly 2/3 of the population lived in the countryside. As the communist government pursued limited agricultural collectivization and heavy industrialization in the 1950s (see *History and Myth* and *Economics and Resources*), this pattern began to shift rapidly. By the late 1960s, about 1/2 of the population lived in urban areas. Today, some 60% live in Poland's cities and towns.

Urban: Warsaw was almost completely destroyed during WWII (see *History and Myth*). Consequently, today most of its buildings date from the period since 1950, and many of the city's residents still live in Soviet-style concrete block apartments built



in the 1960s-70s. Since the 1990s, new housing construction includes modern apartment buildings and some single-family homes, primarily in the suburbs. Many of Poland's other cities maintain historic city centers, some dating to the medieval period, though they also feature Soviet-era apartment buildings intermixed with modern construction.

In general, Poles prefer to own rather than rent their city homes and apartments and expect to pass them to the next generation. Dwellings are often small, with 1-2 bedrooms and a living room that may also be used for sleeping. While furnishings are usually basic and traditional, most homes feature modern appliances and electronics. Residents often decorate their balconies with flowers.



Rural: Before WWII, rural settlement patterns varied by region. The North was characterized by large, landed estates historically populated by the nobility, many of German nationality (see *History and Myth*). In Poland's center and East, small villages featuring wooden buildings were the norm. Today, most village residents occupy small, free-standing single-family brick or cinderblock homes. The countryside also features some small, family farms.

Family Structure

Even if both parents work outside the home (see *Sex and Gender*), the father is traditionally the head of the household and primary breadwinner, while the mother holds responsibility for most household chores, such as cleaning and cooking. Most Poles live as nuclear families (2 parents and their children),



though an increasing number of children grow up in single-parent homes, and some households include extended family.

Poles generally value extended family relationships, making time to visit and have

meals with relatives on a weekly basis. Some grandparents provide childcare if both parents work outside the home. Poles feel a strong sense of loyalty to their elders, often choosing to

provide physical and financial care for their aging parents. Nursing homes generally house only elderly who are without close kin or have serious medical conditions.

Children

Most Polish families have 1-2 children, though rural residents may have more.



Parents instill a sense of responsibility and respect for authority by teaching children how to help around the house from an early age. Parents also instill patriotism and a strong sense of etiquette in young

children, while holding strict expectations of obedience. By contrast, parents typically allow adolescents a significant amount of autonomy and independence. Children usually live at home until marriage, although some may move out to pursue education or employment opportunities elsewhere.

Birth: A birth is a festive occasion. Friends and relatives visit the home bearing gifts, such as flowers or sweets, to ensure the baby an enjoyable life. Later, the child's parents appoint godparents, who promise to help raise the child and typically remain important figures throughout the child's life.

Catholic Poles typically baptize their babies when they are a few months old. During the ceremony, friends and relatives hide gold coins in the baby's diaper for good luck. Another way parents try to ensure good luck is to tie red ribbons to cradles and strollers.

Childhood Milestones: Other significant childhood milestones coincide with Roman Catholic religious sacraments, such as first communion and confirmation, celebrated at ages 8 and 15 respectively. Both events involve formal attire, special church services, and meals shared with extended family.

Dating and Marriage

Boys and girls typically interact from a young age, socializing at school and sports events, and begin dating in their teens. Young

people tend to date several potential partners before becoming serious, then date for a year or more before deciding to marry. Although Poles traditionally disapprove of cohabitation outside of marriage, a growing number of couples are deciding to live together before or instead of marrying.

In line with Roman Catholic teachings, Poles typically view marriage as a holy contract with one lifelong spouse. Though some marriages historically served as strategic alliances between families, most couples today marry for love. Some Poles marry young, around 18-20 for women and 21 for men, though most wait until age 28-31. The number of marriages has been steadily decreasing since 2008 aside from a slight increase in 2021. Experts suggest this trend may be due to increased rates of cohabitation and to the fact that significant numbers of young people permanently or temporarily leave Poland seeking employment and educational opportunities abroad.

Weddings: To become engaged, the young man traditionally sought the permission of the woman's parents. Although this practice is less common today, couples still typically enjoy a long engagement before setting the wedding date.

Poles may marry in a civil ceremony held at a local government registry or they may opt for a religious ceremony held at a church and file their marriage papers at the registry separately.



During civil ceremonies, the bride and groom recite vows, exchange rings, and then sign a marriage contract. By contrast, church weddings tend to be larger events, where the couple's extended families watch as they speak their vows and exchange rings and a priest sanctifies the union.

After the ceremony, whether civil or religious, couples typically host a reception at a restaurant or reception hall. Weddings are usually held on Saturdays, and the festivities often last into the next morning or in some cases for several days. Some brides

and guests wear traditional folk costumes (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*), a custom that is especially prevalent among members of the Tatar ethnic group (see *Political and Social Relations* and *Religion and Spirituality*).

Poles enjoy many unique wedding traditions. For example, friends may “block” the couple’s path to the wedding ceremony and request “payment” of vodka to clear the way. Upon arriving at the reception venue, the groom typically carries the bride over the threshold. During the festivities, the parents traditionally serve the newlyweds a symbolic meal of bread, salt, and wine. While the bread represents the parents’ hope that the new couple always experiences abundance, the salt signifies the difficulties they will inevitably face. The wine demonstrates the parents’ hope for happiness and health for the new couple.

The highlight of the festivities occurs at midnight, in a ritual called the **oczepiny**. The bride throws her veil to the young, unmarried



women in attendance, while the groom tosses his tie to the eligible young men. Tradition says that the young people who catch the items will marry next. As the festivities are ending, guests pay for the honor of a final dance

with the bride by pinning money to her dress or placing it in a designated basket. The couple then uses the funds for their honeymoon. Guests toss rice and coins at the couple as they depart.

Divorce: In line with Roman Catholic teachings, divorce traditionally held significant social stigma. Today, divorce is increasingly common, especially in urban areas, though strict legal requirements can make it difficult to obtain. Under Polish law, a couple seeking divorce must prove irreconcilable differences and attest that there is no chance for future reconciliation. A judge may refuse to grant a divorce if he deems it not in the best interest of the couple’s children or believes the

person initiating the request is responsible for the marriage's failure. Despite such legal hurdles, the Polish divorce rate in 2023 was 1.6 per 1,000 people, similar to rates in neighboring Slovakia (1.5) and Germany (1.7) yet significantly lower than neighboring Lithuania's rate of 2.5 and the US rate of 2.5.

Death

Following a loved one's death, mourners gather for a casket viewing at the deceased family's home, a church, or funeral parlor. Family members take turns sitting with the deceased, even overnight, reciting prayers, singing hymns, and receiving condolences. During the viewing, the family may follow several traditional practices, such as lighting candles, opening the windows of the home to allow the soul to escape to heaven, or stopping the home's clocks at the time of the person's death.



After the viewing, mourners gather at a church for a funeral service then burial in a cemetery. After the

funeral, the family hosts a **stypa**, a special meal in honor of the deceased. The meal typically includes foods that symbolize the soul's journey after death, such as grain to represent rebirth, honey for the sweet reunion with God, and poppy seeds for a good rest. Mourners typically gather again for a shared meal a year after the death. Some Poles visit their loved ones' graves frequently throughout the year, leaving candles and flowers.

On **Wszystkich Świętych** or All

Saints' Day, Poles gather in cemeteries to light candles and pray for the souls of their deceased family members.



5. SEX AND GENDER

Overview

While Poles' outlook on gender roles is changing, Polish society is traditionally patriarchal, meaning that men hold most power and authority. Although women and men have equal rights before the law, women continue to face workplace inequalities and gender-based violence.



Gender Roles and Work

Domestic Work: Polish women traditionally hold responsibility for household chores and childcare even if she works outside the home (see *Family and Kinship*).

Labor Force: In 2024, about 52% of Polish women worked outside the home. This rate is on par with those of neighboring Slovakia (55%) and the Czech Republic (53%), and the US rate of 57%. Women are well represented in high-level government and business positions. In Poland, 17% of firms have females in senior management, which is lower than the European Union's average of 22%. While women earn about 8% less than men on average, this gap is significantly smaller than the EU average of 12% and is one of the EU's smallest. The gender difference in employment narrows as educational attainment rises but, women earn less than men and the wage gap widens faster with educational attainment. Women also experience widespread harassment and discrimination in the workplace.

Gender and the Law

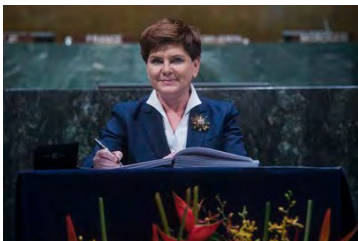
While no national law guarantees women equal rights, the Equal Treatment Act of 2010 includes gender as one of many potential forms of discrimination, which is outlawed. Polish law does stipulate equal treatment in inheritance and parental authority as well as equal access to financial services. Though the process is burdensome (see *Family and Kinship*), both men and women may initiate divorce proceedings.

Despite this supporting legal framework, some gender disparities and unequal treatment still exist. For example, women suffer discrimination in hiring and promotion processes. Further, while the law criminalizes sexual harassment in the workplace, the burden of proof for both discrimination and harassment lies entirely on the victim. As a result, victims of these crimes face significant hurdles when seeking justice.

According to some observers, the PiS-led government (see *Political and Social Relations*) has recently supported an array of issues that seem aimed at reducing women's rights rather than enhancing them. For example, the government has recently advocated Poland's withdrawal from an international treaty aimed at preventing violence against women. Polish officials have also withheld funding from several women's organizations, claiming their support to female victims of domestic violence is discriminatory to men.

Gender and Politics

Women serve at all levels of government. Legislative quotas passed by the **Sejm** (lower house of Parliament) in 2011 mandate that at least 35% of lower house



candidates are female. As of April 2025, women held 29% of *Sejm* seats, on par with that of the US Congress (28%). Women also serve in other top government posts. Poland elected its first female Prime Minister (PM) in 1992. Recently, Ewa Kopacz held the post in 2014-15. Succeeding her, Beata Szydło was PM until late 2017 (see *History and Myth*).

Gender Based Violence (GBV)

GBV is a widespread problem in Poland. After significant public debate, Poland passed a domestic violence law in 2015 despite protest among some lawmakers that it threatened traditional family structures. Since then, there is little indication that the number of GBV cases has decreased. Recent government steps (see "Gender and the Law" above) suggest the government is lessening its support for GBV victims rather than increasing it.

Rape, including spousal rape, is illegal and punishable by up to 12 years in prison. Domestic violence may incur a sentence of maximum 5 years in prison, though most perpetrators receive suspended sentences. Official statistics understate the true scope of the problem, as victims are often unwilling to report GBV incidents due to social stigma and burdensome reporting procedures. Even if victims report incidents, the police are sometimes reluctant to intervene in what they view as family matters. Similarly, legally-mandated local interagency teams charged with dealing with GBV cases sometimes choose to

address what they see as a “family problem” than bring criminal charges against perpetrators.



Trafficking: Poland is a source, transit point, and destination for sex and labor trafficking of both adults and children

from Europe, Asia, and Africa. Roma children (see *Political and Social Relations*) are particularly vulnerable to forced begging in urban areas. The government has made notable efforts to eliminate trafficking yet still has challenges in identifying underage victims and prosecuting labor trafficking cases.

Sex and Procreation

At 1.3 children per woman in 2024, Poland's birthrate is well below the rate required to maintain a stable population and is tied with Spain for the EU's lowest rate. To counteract this trend, the PiS-government implemented in 2018, a subsidy program to encourage families to have at least 2 children (see *Economics and Resources*).

While there are no legal restrictions on the right to obtain contraceptives, some policies most likely based on tenets of the Catholic faith, hinder women's access. For example, the government denies subsidies for contraceptives, unlike other medications, while allowing medical professionals to refuse to prescribe contraceptives. Further, voluntary forms of sterilization are illegal.

Though abortions were widely available during the communist era (see *History and Myth*), current Polish abortion laws are among the EU's strictest. Abortions are permissible only if the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest, or if it poses a grave threat to the mother's life.



This stringency has resulted in an underground industry of “abortion tourism,” with clinics in neighboring countries

providing these services to Polish women. In collaboration with the Roman Catholic Church, the PiS-led government (see *Political and Social Relations*) introduced a policy proposal in 2016 that would outlaw abortions in all cases, including rape, and impose prison sentences for women and physicians who terminated pregnancies. The proposal provoked mass protests across Poland, causing the government to withdraw the plan. In 2017, a bill to liberalize abortion laws, legalizing all abortion through the 12th week of pregnancy, never came to a vote. Since January 2021, the Polish government has imposed a near-total ban on abortions, no longer allowing termination of pregnancies with fetal defect.

Homosexuality in Poland

Individuals who identify as homosexual experience harassment and discrimination at school and in the workplace, even though employment laws prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation. A 2017 Pride Parade in Warsaw attracted some 50,000 supporters and Polish law enforcement has created a special handbook to guide police in treating homosexuals with respect and tolerance. Even though the PiS-led government continues to oppose civil unions for same-sex couples, Poland's Supreme Court recognized same-sex cohabitants in 2016, granting them limited legal rights and protections. In 2024, Poland's government approved plans to add sexual orientation, gender, age, and disability protections to hate crime laws. At this time, the US State Department has a Status of Forces Agreement in place for Poland. Service members will be held accountable to the Uniformed Code of Military Justice.

6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Language Overview

Poland's official language is Polish, spoken as a first language by about 99% of the population. Despite efforts by foreign rulers to suppress the language during the 19th century (see *History and Myth*), Polish thrived. Along with Roman Catholicism (see *Religion and Spirituality*), the language is an important part of Polish national identity today.

Polish

Polish is a member of the West Slavic branch of the Slavic family of languages and is related to Czech and Slovak. Before World War II (WWII), regional residents spoke 4 major Polish dialects (Greater Polish, Lesser Polish, Masovian, and Upper Silesian). After the war, mass population movements (see *History and Myth*) and enhanced education supported the development of a standard variety. Today, most Poles speak the standard form with some regional differences in accent and vocabulary. Polish is written with the Latin script used for English, with 9 additional letters: ą, ć, ę, ł, ń, ó, ś, ź, ż. Of note, the letter “w” in Polish is pronounced like the English “v”.



Minority and Regional Languages

Polish law distinguishes 14 minority languages that correspond to the 14 officially-recognized national and ethnic minorities (see *Political and Social Relations*). Specifically, the law recognizes 9 national minority languages (German, Russian, Belarusian, Czech, Lithuanian, Armenian, Slovak, Ukrainian, and Yiddish) and 4 ethnic minority languages (Karaim, Rusyn, Tatar, and Romani (the language of the Roma or “Gypsies” – see *Political and Social Relations*). Further, the government recognizes 1 regional language, Kashubian.

As of 2021, some 216,342 residents speak German and 63,271 residents speak Russian as their primary language. Most of the other languages have fewer than 60,000 speakers each, except for Kashubian, which has around 89,198. The Polish government grants speakers of these languages certain rights such as the right to receive limited instruction in their minority language in school (see *Learning and Knowledge*).

English

Since Poland's post-communism pivot to Western Europe and 2004 accession to the EU, English has replaced Russian as the language of business. According to a recent assessment, Poland ranks in the global top-10 for English proficiency, ahead of Germany, Singapore, and Switzerland. Approximately 33% of the population has some knowledge of English, though individuals' skills vary by age and residence. In general, younger Poles living in large cities are much more likely to speak English than the older generation and those living in rural areas.

Esperanto: An International Artificial Language

Invented in 1887 by Polish physician L.L. Zamenhof, Esperanto is the world's most widely-used artificial language. Created so that peoples of different cultures and ethnicities could communicate in a "neutral tongue," Esperanto never enjoyed the widespread success that Zamenhof intended, though it is spoken by more than 2 million people in 100 countries today.

Communication Overview

Communicating competently in Poland requires not only knowledge of Polish, but also the ability to interact effectively using language. This broad notion of competence includes paralanguage (rate of speech, volume, intonation), nonverbal communication (personal space, touch, gestures), and interaction management (conversation initiation, turn-taking, and termination). When used properly, these forms of communication help to ensure that statements are interpreted as the speaker intends.

Communication Style

Communication patterns reflect the values Poles place on self-reliance and candor. Poles usually communicate in a straightforward and realistic manner, and compared to Americans, they may appear guarded or overly formal among new acquaintances and business contacts. Comfortable in silence and typically unemotional around strangers, some Poles, especially those in rural areas, can appear aloof and unfriendly. Nevertheless, they are generally hospitable and outgoing among family and friends. Poles tend to be lively conversationalists, often speaking loudly and forcefully. Rarely a sign of anger, such animation indicates instead a speaker's passion for the subject.

Greetings

Greetings vary depending on age, gender, and social situation. Adult acquaintances typically exchange handshakes, while female friends and relatives often embrace and exchange 3 cheek kisses. Older men may bow and kiss a woman's hand as a sign of respect, although this tradition is diminishing. Friends may orally greet each other with a simple **Cześć** ("hi") or **Hej** ("hello"). More formal greetings include **Dzień dobry** ("good day") and **Dobry wieczór** ("good evening").



Names

Polish names comprise a first (given) and a last (family) name, with a woman traditionally taking her husband's last name upon marriage. Female first names almost always end in "a," while male names may end in any letter, including "a." Most last names have different forms to indicate gender. For example, many common male last names end in **-ski** and **-cki** while the female versions end in **-ska** or **-cka**. A few family names do not change to indicate gender, such as those ending in **-wicz**.

Forms of Address

Poles use different forms of address to demonstrate respect and the nature of the relationship. For example, Poles typically address elders, superiors, and acquaintances with **Pan** (Mr.) and **Pani** (Ms. or Mrs.) followed by the last name. Close friends and family members address each other by first name. Colleagues and acquaintances maintain formal forms of address until they mutually agree to use first names.

Conversational Topics

Conversation in business settings and among acquaintances may be quite formal, centering on general inquiries about the well-being of a person and his family members. Sometimes direct, such inquiries are meant to establish an open and honest dialogue. In informal settings, conversation flows more freely and covers a range of topics. While



Poles often discuss sensitive topics, foreign nationals should avoid potentially sensitive or controversial subjects such as Poland's experience during WWII, the communist era, religion, and current politics (see *Political and Social Relations*). While some Poles cultivate a dark sense of humor and enjoy making jokes about the country's history and current challenges, foreign nationals should remain neutral to avoid offense.

Gestures

Poles typically make extensive use of their hands and bodies during conversation, such as leaning forward or standing up to make a particularly important point. To wish good luck, Poles hold their thumbs within closed fists. Foreign nationals should avoid speaking with their hands in their pockets, a stance Poles consider rude.

Language and Training Sources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/ and click on "Resources" for access to language training and other resources.

Useful Words and Phrases

English	Polish
Hello	Witaj
Hi	Cześć
Good morning	Dzień dobry
Good afternoon/evening	Dobry wieczór
My name is...	Nazywam się ...
Yes	Tak
No	Nie
Please	Proszę
Thank you	Dziękuję
You're welcome	Proszę
Good night	Dobranoc
Where are you from?	Skąd jesteś?
Where do you live?	Gdzie mieszkasz?
I am American	Jestem Amerykaninem (m)/Amerykanką (f)
Do you speak (English/Polish)?	Czy mówisz po (angielsku/polsku)?
Today	Dzisiaj
Tomorrow	Jutro
Yesterday	Wczoraj
The meal was very good	Bardzo mi smakowało
Look!	Popatrz!
Excuse me	Przepraszam
Pardon?	Słucham?
I don't understand	Nie rozumiem
What?	Co?
Where?	Gdzie?
How?	W jaki sposób?
When?	Kiedy?
Why?	Czemu? Or Dlaczego?
I	Ja
You	Ty
You (formal)	Pan (m)/Pani (f)
He/she	On/ona
What time is it?	Która godzina?

7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

Literacy

- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 99.8%
- Male: 99.8%
- Female: 99.8% (2021)

Early History of Education

Before the arrival of formal education, along with introduction and spread of Christianity (see *Religion and Spirituality*), regional inhabitants informally transmitted values, skills, beliefs, and historical knowledge to younger generations. Beginning in the 11th century, the Catholic Church established schools to train clergymen, with most instruction in Latin.

Formal education expanded in the 13th century with the establishment of provincial schools for the children of nobles, knights, and merchants. Seeking to create a class of administrators and lawyers, King Kazimierz III Wielki founded a university in Kraków in 1364 (see *History and Myth*). Known as the Jagiellonian University today, the institution became the center of medieval Poland's intellectual life, producing such famous alumni as Nicolaus Copernicus (see *History and Myth*).

Additional provincial schools opened during the 15th century, providing instruction in religion and basic Latin. As part of the Counter-Reformation (see *Religion and Spirituality*), the Catholic Church, in particular the Jesuit order, opened a network of primary schools in the 16th century. Despite this increase in educational opportunities, relatively few Poles attended these schools since many were serfs bound to the land (see *History and Myth*).



In the 18th century, secular schools appeared. In 1773, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (see *History and Myth*)

established the Commission of National Education (KEN), the world's first ministry of education. The KEN introduced a uniform education system focusing on math, natural science, and Polish language studies (instead of Latin), while integrating trade and agricultural skills at the primary level.

During much of the 18th century, war and disease caused stagnation in the number and quality of educational offerings. By 1795, Russia, Prussia, and Austria had partitioned Poland (see *History and Myth*), with each power administering its own school system. Even though the Austrians permitted instruction in Polish, they largely neglected the education system as a whole. Meanwhile, in its territories, Prussia suppressed Polish language and culture, while creating a comprehensive German-language educational system modeled on Prussia's own schools. In Russian-held areas, authorities repressed the Polish language and closed many schools, resulting in a largely uneducated populace. Despite this oppression, Poles scattered across the region continued to teach and publish in Polish.

Early 20th Century Education

When Poland reemerged as an independent nation in 1918 (see *History and Myth*), the new nation prioritized education. Primary schooling became compulsory, while post-primary opportunities expanded with the development of new secondary schools and universities in several cities. Nevertheless, economic hardships in the 1930s dramatically reduced attendance rates, with few



children in rural areas advancing past primary school.

During World War II (WWII), (see *History and Myth*), Nazi occupying forces attempted to suppress Polish culture, closing all

secondary schools and universities to Poles and prohibiting instruction in Polish language and history in primary schools. The Nazis deported or executed many educators. For example,

most of the Jagiellonian University's professors were sent to concentration camps (see *History and Myth*).

Polish teachers established the underground Secret Teaching Organization to keep Polish language and culture alive during the war years. Even as the Nazis continued to target educated Poles, some 8,000 teachers provided instruction in Polish history to some 1.5 million students in secret schools, while hundreds of professors gave lessons at secret universities.

Education under Communism

The postwar Soviet occupation and subsequent establishment of the communist People's Republic of Poland (see *History and Myth*) transformed Polish education. Changes in the immediate postwar years included the expansion of technical and vocation offerings to support the regime's industrialization goals and an emphasis on the Russian language in addition to Polish. In the late 1950s, broader government reforms (see *History and Myth*) included some education initiatives, notably the restoration of optional Catholic religious education in schools.

Laws adopted in 1961 reaffirmed 4 goals of the education system: prepare workers for industry; develop citizens with the proper communist attitudes; spread the values of the working class; and instill respect for work and Polish values. In the 1960s, the government again outlawed religious instruction in schools, though it did allow after-school instruction at Catholic churches, which



some 80% of primary-age children attended. As part of the Solidarity movement after 1980 (see *History and Myth*), teachers and students regularly demanded educational restructuring. Nevertheless, little real change occurred until the end of communism in 1990.

Modern Education

In 1990, reformers moved quickly to return optional Catholic instruction to the public-school classroom. Further, new laws legalized private schools, established minimum educational standards, and gave students, parents, and teachers significant autonomy in instructional content and methods. Today, Polish students demonstrate good scholastic achievement: in a 2022 assessment of 81 countries, Polish students ranked around 12th compared to the US ranking 31st. In 2023, the government spent 5% of its GDP on education, comparable to the expenditures of neighboring Germany (4.5%) and Czechia (4.5%).

In 2017, the PiS-controlled government (see *Political and Social Relations*) introduced comprehensively unpopular changes to Poland's educational system. Specifically, reforms reversed a 1999 law creating new lower-secondary schools which were responsible for improving educational outcomes. The subsequent reincorporation of lower-secondary students into primary schools resulted in the closure of some 7,000 lower-secondary schools and the layoffs of up to 9,000 teachers.

These organizational changes provoked teacher strikes and protests. Further, some aspects of the reforms attracted significant international media attention, namely their revision of the curriculum to incorporate the nationalist and conservative ideology of the ruling PiS (see *Political and Social Relations*). For example, the primary school curriculum was rewritten to emphasize Poland's military history and heroes over world and regional history. Some changes were especially controversial, such as the removal of the Holocaust from history lessons on WWII. Reflecting PiS's strong connection to the Catholic Church, sexual education classes no longer include instruction on contraception methods (see *Sex and Gender*).



By law, Poland's 184 officially-recognized religious groups (see *Religion and Spirituality*) provide voluntary religious instruction in public and private schools. Public schools must provide religious instruction in any of the registered faiths if at least 7 students request it. Each religious group determines course content and provides a qualified instructor who is paid by the government. Students may request an optional ethics class instead of a religion class. Not surprising given the predominance of Roman Catholicism among the population (see *Religion and Spirituality*), most public schools offer Catholic religious education. Further, many public-school classrooms predominantly display Catholic crucifixes or other Christian symbols.

Pre-Primary: Public and private preschools provide optional education for children aged 3-5 and obligatory education for 6-year-olds. While the law states that every child is entitled to a pre-primary education, enrollment still lags. As of 2023, some 96% of appropriately aged children were enrolled in pre-primary programs, higher than the 2023 European Union (EU) average of 92%. Around 72% of pre-primary students attended public institutions.

Primary: Consisting of 8 grades starting at age 7, primary school is compulsory. The curriculum for the lower grades (1-3) includes the Polish language, a modern foreign language, music, art, integrated math and science lessons, and computer



classes. In the upper grades (4-8) students also have lessons in Polish history, civics, natural science, mathematics, and technology. By law, primary schools serving minority populations must offer lessons in both

Polish and the relevant minority language. As of 2023, some 99% of children of the appropriate age attended primary school.

Secondary: Secondary education encompasses 2 tracks: general and vocational/technical. Neither is compulsory. Comprising grades 9-12 (around ages 15-19), general secondary school allows students to deepen their knowledge of basic school subjects and pursue electives and a second modern foreign language. Schools serving minority populations also provide instruction in the relevant minority language (see *Language and Communication*). Secondary school graduates must pass an external examination to advance to post-secondary education.



Students pursuing secondary vocational/technical education choose between a basic vocational school (3 grades) and an upper-secondary technical school (5 grades). Basic vocational school graduates may choose to continue their education at second-level vocational schools. All vocational and technical graduates who pass an external examination may continue their education at the university level. In 2023, some 99% of students were enrolled in upper secondary schools.

Post-Secondary Education

Poland has a long history of higher education. Since its founding in the 14th century, Kraków's Jagiellonian University continues to be one of Poland's foremost universities, serving some 40,000 students today. Other prominent institutions include the University of Warsaw, the Warsaw University of Technology, and Adam Mickiewicz University Poznań.

There are more than 300 higher education institutions, education approximately 1.2 million students, with more than 100 offering programs in English. Public university education is free to citizens of the EU, though most such programs have stringent admissions requirements and are taught primarily in Polish. As of 2024, some 46% of Poles aged 25-34 years had attained at least a bachelor's degree or equivalent, lower than the US rate of 52% but higher than the EU average of 44%.

8. TIME AND SPACE

Overview

Poles appreciate direct and honest communication, while reserving physical affection and informality for close friends and family. In general, personal connections are valued and key to conducting successful business in Poland.

Time and Work

Poland's work week typically runs Monday-Friday from 9:00am-5:00pm, though some individuals prefer 7:00am-3:00pm. A few offices open Saturdays from 9:00am-1:00pm. While hours vary, many shops and markets open Monday-Friday from 8:00am-6:00pm and Saturday from 10:00am-2:00pm. Shopping centers, by contrast, have longer hours and are typically open weekends from 9:00am-8:00pm. Poland's trade unions collaborated with the Roman Catholic Church in an effort to ban all shopping on Sundays.



Most banks open Monday-Friday from 9:00am-4:00pm and Saturday from 9:00am-1:00 pm. Post office hours are typically Monday-Friday from 8:00am-7:00pm and Saturday from 8:00am-1pm. Generally, restaurants are open from 11:00 am-10pm daily. Museums are usually closed on Mondays and are open for abbreviated hours outside of the peak tourist season.

Working Conditions: Under Polish labor law, the legal work week is 40 hours, with up to 8 hours of paid overtime. Poles also receive double compensation for overtime worked during public holidays, Sundays, and overnight. Certain labor laws are intended to protect women and mothers in the workplace, yet they are seldom enforced. In addition to paid public holidays, Polish workers receive at least 20 days of paid vacation a year.

Time Zone: Poland adheres to Central European Time (CET), which is 1 hour ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and 6

hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time (EST). Poland observes daylight savings time.

Date Notation: Like the US, Poland uses the Western (Gregorian) calendar. Unlike Americans, Poles typically write the day first, followed by the month and year.

National Holidays

- January 1: New Year's Day
- January 6: Epiphany
- March/April: Easter
- May 1: Labor Day
- May 3: Constitution Day
- May/June: Corpus Christi Day
- August 15: Assumption/Armed Forces Day
- November 1: All Saints Day
- November 11: Independence Day
- December 25 and 26: Christmas

Any holiday that falls on a weekend is observed on the following Monday.

Time and Business

Polish business interactions tend to be somewhat formal (see *Language and Communication*). Communications are typically direct and open: participants freely speak their opinions and expect foreign nationals to do the same.

Polish business partners typically refrain from using first names, preferring titles and last names. Upon meeting, Poles greet each person individually, usually by shaking hands (see *Language and Communication*). While Poles appreciate punctuality, arriving somewhat late is typically acceptable given prior notification.

Once seated, meeting participants typically exchange business cards and share coffee or tea. While the most senior manager usually leads the meeting, the atmosphere is usually relaxed.

Poles may interrupt presentations to ask questions or add comments. Formal meetings tend to take place in the office, though businesspeople may hold lunch or dinner meetings in

order to cement relationships rather than hold serious discussions.

Though more prevalent during the communist era (see *History and Myth*), hierarchical business structures remain the

norm in some Polish offices. Even in less hierarchical environments, decision-making generally follows a structured process. Personal contacts and informal networks were key to navigating the extensive red tape and bureaucracy of the communist era and remain the norm today. Furthermore, the exchange of small, non-monetary gifts helps to nurture these informal networks.

Personal Space

As in most societies, personal space in Poland depends on the nature of the relationship. Generally, Poles tend to maintain about an arm's length of distance when interacting with acquaintances and strangers. With friends and family, the space is much smaller.

Touch: Conversational touching depends largely on the level of familiarity. While formal situations rarely involve touching beyond handshakes (see *Language and Communication*), Poles typically engage in more informal same-sex touching than Americans. For example, female friends often hold hands to demonstrate affection. Similarly, male friends often touch each



other on the back or arm during informal conversations to make a point or indicate agreement.

Eye Contact: Poles typically engage in direct eye contact during greetings (see *Language and Communication*) to convey interest, respect, and transparency. Nevertheless, too much direct eye contact or staring may be considered a sign of aggression. Men typically avoid extended eye contact when interacting with female acquaintances and unrelated women.

Photographs

Government installations such as police and military buildings, bridges, transportation hubs, and ports generally discourage or prohibit photography. Foreign nationals should obtain the permission of a Pole before taking his photo.

Driving

Some drivers have aggressive habits, often violating traffic rules and passing other vehicles in dangerous areas on narrow roads. In rural regions, obstacles such as horse-drawn carts and agricultural vehicles can make driving hazardous, particularly at night. Traffic is usually heavy in densely populated areas, where ongoing road construction also hinders traffic flow. Nevertheless, the number of traffic-related deaths has steadily decreased over the last decade. At 5 per 100,000 people in 2023 Poland's rate of traffic-related deaths is one of the EU's higher rates, higher than in neighboring Germany (3) yet significantly lower than in the US (13).



Like Americans, Poles drive on the right side of the road. Poland's streetcars command the right of way in all situations. The law also mandates the use headlights at all times, regardless of time of day or weather conditions.

9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

Overview

Poland's traditional dress, recreation, music, and arts reflect the country's rural customs, Catholic influence, history of foreign occupations, and modern global traditions.

Dress and Appearance

Traditional: As late as the 1980s, some women wore traditional clothing on a regular basis but less so in modern times. Some Poles wear traditional costumes for festivals, special events, and church services. Styles, colors, and fabrics tend to vary by region.

Women's attire typically consists of a white blouse (*kabotek*) worn beneath a corset-like vest (*wierzcheń*) and paired with a scarf (*merynka*) tied across the chest. The outfit also includes layers of skirts beneath a pleated dress (*kiecka*). While single girls typically braid their hair into flower wreaths (*garlanda*), older women tend to cover their hair with scarves whose colors indicate their married or widowed status.



Men's wear consists of a vest worn beneath a long jacket (*kamzela*). A silk kerchief (*jedbowka*) adds flair. Traditionally, the style of pants varied with social class: wealthy men tended to wear breeches of deer leather (*jelenioki*) and lower-class opting for cloth trousers. A wide-brimmed hat (*kania*) finishes the look.

Modern: For everyday dress, most Poles wear clothing that reflects the latest European fashion trends. Poles historically favored conservative styles and muted colors, though as Poland's economy has expanded, so has the popularity of a wider range of colors and styles. Nevertheless, business attire

remains modest and formal, with men preferring suits and women wearing dresses or blouses with trousers.

While older women, particularly in rural areas, tend to wear head scarves and long skirts with stockings, the younger generation typically favors more mainstream European styles. Younger Poles are especially fond of denim, sneakers, and apparel from US sport teams. For most Poles, the high price of clothing makes second-hand stores common places to shop.

Recreation and Leisure

Poles typically prefer to spend their leisure time with family and close friends, particularly outdoors where they often walk, hike, and kayak in Poland's 23 national parks. During the summer, Poles enjoy collecting mushrooms and berries in the woods. Favorite indoor activities include watching television, reading, and playing card games. Largely unavailable during the communist era, movie theaters, bars and clubs, shopping



centers and restaurants are now popular places to spend leisure time. Many Poles use their generous vacation time (see *Time and Space*) to travel both within and beyond the

country. Weekend trips to the mountains, shore, and various lakes are also common leisurely activities.

Holidays and Festivals: As a predominantly Catholic nation (see *Religion and Spirituality*), Poland's primary holidays are Christmas and Easter. Christmas Eve festivities typically begin when the first star of the night is seen and consists of a 12-course meal eaten at a table with hay under the tablecloth to represent Christ's birth in a manger. Later, Poles gather at church for a midnight mass.

Easter traditionally consists of a series of observances beginning weeks prior to the official holiday. First, Poles celebrate the week-long Carnival with elaborate parties, feasting, and drinking. Each day typically has its own rituals and

traditions. On Fat Thursday, for example, it is customary to eat traditional doughnuts (*pączki*). Residents in mountainous regions celebrate Carnival with sleigh rides, bonfires, and mulled beverages. Poles then observe 40 days of Lent, a period of solemn reflection and temperance. They then celebrate the official Easter “Holy Week” consisting of Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Sunday, and Easter Monday. Observances typically involve attending church services and sharing meals.



Some holiday celebrations mix Christian elements with pagan traditions. For example, on All Saints' Day (see *Family and Kinship*), Catholic Poles visit the cemetery to pray and leave food at their loved ones' graves for the spirits of the departed. On **Śmigus-dyngus** (“Wet Monday”), celebrated on Easter Monday, boys roam the streets and douse unsuspecting people with buckets of water. While some scholars believe the practice has its origins in ancient fertility rituals, others suggest it refers to the baptism of Duke Mieszko I and his 10th-century unification of the Polish tribes under Christianity (see *History and Myth*).

Various cities host song, dance, and music festivals often dedicated to Poland's most famous classical composer, Frédéric Chopin (see *History and Myth*). The Warsaw Autumn Festival of Contemporary Music features modern musical acts, while the Warsaw Street Art Festival held during the summer features visual and installation art around the city. The Jewish Culture Festival in Kraków commemorates Jewish history and culture and is one of the world's largest events.

Sports and Games

Sports: Soccer is Poland's most popular sport, followed by basketball, volleyball, and track and field. Cycling and running are also common, though bikes remain primarily a mode of transportation rather than a form of recreation in rural areas.

Snow skiing is popular in Poland's Tatra mountain range, and the Mazury Lakes are a favored destination for sailing enthusiasts.

Soccer: Most sizeable urban centers have their own soccer



teams. In the 1970s-80s, Poland's national team was among the world's best, winning the gold medal in the 1972 Olympics and placing 3rd in the 1974 and 1982 FIFA World Cups. More recently,

Poland advanced to the quarterfinals of the 2016 European championship, although in the 2018 FIFA World Cup, Poland failed to advance to the knockout stage.

Traditional Games: Poles also enjoy various traditional games. Similar to baseball, **palant** requires players to hit a ball with a bat and run to a finish line before the other team can tag them with the ball. Popular among herdsman prior to World War II, **kapela** requires players try to knock over a small stone pyramid with another stone. Invented in the 1930s and similar to volleyball, **pierścieniówka** ("ring ball") requires teams to use both hands as they toss a ball back and forth through 3 holes in a suspended net.

Music

Traditional: The sounds and melodies of traditional Polish music date to the Middle Ages, when the Polish court began to provide significant patronage to musicians. Later composers looked to these traditions as inspiration. For example, 19th-century composer Frédéric Chopin used the rhythms and melodies of traditional Polish folk songs in his compositions, becoming the musical embodiment of "Polishness" for many of his countrymen (see *History and Myth*). Today, Poles enjoy both older folk styles and all types of classical music, such as opera, symphony, chamber, and choral. Considered Poland's greatest

living composer, Krzysztof Penderecki has written all types of music, from operas to Hollywood film themes.



Modern: Contemporary musical genres also thrive in Poland. Poland's first rock musician, Tadeusz Nalepa, started his musical career in the 1960s. In the early 1980s, the rock bands

Lady Pank and Republika gained some international acclaim. Even though the communist government outlawed jazz during the first 2 decades of its rule, the jazz scene managed to thrive. A subgenre of dance music called "Disco Polo" emerged in the 1990s and is still popular. Today, Poles indulge the full range of international pop, rock, hip-hop, and other styles.

Dance

Several traditional Polish dances are well known across Europe. A slow, deliberate dance originating in the 17th-century royal court, the **Polonaise** is performed by a promenade of couples gliding across the dance floor, while bending the knees slightly with every 3rd step. By contrast, the **Mazurka** is a highly unrehearsed yet lively waltz performed by a circle of couples who stamp their feet and click their heels. In the **Krakowiak**, a traditional dance from the city of Kraków, couples circle a band while the lead male dancer sings and indicates the steps.



Theater and Cinema

The origins of Polish theater trace to the 18th century, when the first original plays written in Polish were performed. During the

communist era, the government was only marginally successful in manipulating this theatrical tradition into a mode of propaganda. Instead, playwrights cleverly used language to critique the regime while avoiding the censor. Popular since the early 20th century, cabaret is a theater form that combines satire and music to mimic public figures and Polish stereotypes.

Polish film also has a rich history. While the first Polish film premiered in 1908, it was only after World War II (WWII) that Polish productions gained significant international attention. Internationally acclaimed Polish filmmaker Andrzej Wajda

received several Oscar nominations, most recently for his 2007 film *Katyń*, a depiction of the 1940 massacre of Poles by the Soviets (see *History and Myth*). In 2015, the Polish film *Ida* won an Oscar for its portrayal of a young woman orphaned



during WWII as she comes to terms with her Jewish identity in 1962 Poland.

Literature

Over the centuries Polish literature served as both an expression of national identity and an outlet of opposition to foreign occupiers. Poland's oldest literature comprises orally-transmitted poems, myths, and legends featuring a range of characters like bandits, saints, and dragons. While the oldest written Polish texts date to the 10th century, Polish emerged as a language of literature during the 16th-century "Golden Age" (see *History and Myth*). During this period, Mikołaj Rej was the first author to write exclusively in Polish, while Jan Kochanowski devised new Polish-language verse forms that earned him the nickname "father of Polish literature."

During the 17th-18th centuries, Polish literature focused on political awareness and building a national identity within the

multi-ethnic Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (see *History and Myth*). This quest for a national narrative continued through the foreign occupations of the 19th century (see *History and Myth*), inspiring writers like poet, dramatist, essayist, and political activist Adam Mickiewicz. Recognized as Poland's national epic, his poem *Pan Tadeusz* tells the story of 2 feuding noble families in Russia-controlled Poland in the early 19th century. The late 19th-early 20th centuries saw the emergence of several great Polish prose writers, notably Joseph Conrad, although he wrote primarily in English in his later life.

During the communist era, the state promoted "Socialist Realism," an artistic tradition intended to glorify the industrial worker and farmer. Some authors promoted other styles, often using literary devices to covertly critique the regime. For example, Tadeusz Konwicki wrote 2 novels in the late 1970s that used satire and parody to protest the communist government. Writing from Chicago, Czesław Miłosz, a Lithuanian-born Pole, won the 1980 Nobel Prize for Literature for his work critiquing artists who accommodated communism. Poet and essayist Wisława Szymborska won the same prize in 1996 for her poems exploring war, terrorism, and obsession.

Folk Arts and Handicrafts

Poland has a rich folk-art tradition, including woodcarving, ceramics, embroidery, decorated Easter eggs (***pisanki***), amber and other jewelry, and painting. These works often demonstrate a unique combination of Christian symbols and ancient pagan themes. For example, common motifs of the traditional craft of papercutting (***wycinanki***) include flowering trees, roosters, and women's silhouettes that symbolize heaven and earth, fertility, and mother earth. Handmade Polish ceramics featuring floral and geometric designs are well-known across Europe today.



10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

Sustenance Overview

Poles value hospitality and socializing with family and friends over meals. From spring-fall, Poles gather to barbecue, picnic, and collect wild foods such as berries and mushrooms. Polish cuisine is characterized by simply seasoned yet hearty dishes featuring fresh, local ingredients.

Dining Customs

Most Poles supplement 3 daily meals with mid-morning and late-afternoon snacks. While lunch is traditionally the largest and main meal, dinner also tends to be substantial. Most visits to a home are arranged in advance, though close friends and family may drop by unannounced, especially in rural areas. Poles may invite guests for afternoon tea and sweets, full meals, or evening drinks and snacks.

When invited to a Polish home for a meal, guests typically arrive on time, bringing gifts of alcohol, sweets, or flowers. Upon entering a home, guests remove their shoes and replace them with slippers, usually provided by the host. Meals typically consist of a series of courses served at a leisurely pace. Hosts serve their guests first and offer multiple helpings throughout the meal. Leaving a small amount of food on the plate signifies that a diner is full. Poles consider it impolite to leave the table until all diners have finished eating.

Alcoholic beverages accompany most meals and are especially prominent during formal dinners and on special occasions.

Diet

Polish cuisine reflects the nation's agrarian past and features seasonal produce, foraged wild foods, and local meat and fish. Culinary traditions also reflect the historic need to preserve food



through Poland's harsh winters. For example, many traditional dishes are rich in pickled, smoked, dried, and salted ingredients. A main staple, potatoes are prepared in a variety of ways, such as boiled, fried, incorporated into salads, or transformed into dumplings and pancakes. Bread is another staple that accompanies almost every meal. Polish families often purchase fresh bread daily. Popular types include coarse dark and sour



white ryes enjoyed with cheese, butter, or jam. Other common grains include rice, barley, oats, and buckwheat.

Meat is particularly popular, with many dishes featuring pork, chicken,

lamb, beef, or **kielbasa** (sausage) as a primary ingredient. *Kielbasa* may be boiled, baked, smoked, or grilled and served alone, on a bun, with onions, peppers, and sauerkraut, or as part of a soup. Poles also enjoy several types of fish, notably carp, herring, and salmon, typically served fried, smoked, pickled, salted, or incorporated into soups or salads.

Common vegetables include beets, cabbage, carrots, cucumbers, and a variety of legumes such as peas, beans, and lentils. Poles prepare freshly-gathered wild mushrooms in a variety of ways such as fried, boiled, pickled, or made into rich sauces, fillings, and soups. Locally grown fruits, like cherries, apples, plums, strawberries, raspberries, and currants are especially widespread in the spring and summer. Polish dishes also incorporate assorted dairy products such as cheese, yogurt, milk, sour cream, and cottage cheese. Dill, marjoram, caraway seeds, parsley, chives, and black pepper accent many dishes.

Popular Dishes and Meals

For breakfast, Poles typically dine on bread, cheese, cured meats, eggs (prepared in a variety of ways), yogurt, porridge, or cold cereal served with milk. Lunch typically includes 3 courses consisting of a rich soup, followed by a meat or fish dish served

with potatoes and cooked seasonal vegetables or fresh salad, and a dessert. Dinner may comprise several courses or be a smaller meal.

Popular dishes include **pierogi** (dumplings stuffed with a variety of fillings such as minced meat, vegetables, cheese, or potatoes and served with butter or sour cream); **bigos** (a thick stew of sausage, pork, or beef cooked with mushrooms, sauerkraut, or sweet cabbage); **żurek** (fermented rye flour stewed in sausage stock and served with a boiled egg); **gołąbki** (rolled cabbage leaves stuffed with spiced minced meat); **schab pieczony** (roasted pork loin); **barszcz** (beet root soup), and **golonka** (boiled ham hocks, served with pureed peas and sauerkraut). For dessert, Poles prefer poppy seed pastries, **sernik** (cheese cake), and **pączki** (donuts). **Babka**, a tall, yeast-risen cake, is particularly popular at holidays.

Beverages

Coffee and tea served with lemon and sugar are the most popular beverages and consumed throughout the day. Vodka, first distilled in Poland in the 15th century, is the



most common alcoholic beverage, though beer and wine have gained in popularity in recent years. Many Poles enjoy shots of chilled, unflavored vodka (**czysta**) with morsels of sausage, dill pickles, or pickled herring. Sweetened, flavored vodka varieties include cherry, honey, herbal, and mint, among others.

Eating Out

Poles in urban areas tend to eat out regularly. Restaurants range from upscale establishments serving regional and international foods to small, casual eateries. Cafes (**kawiarnia**) serving coffee, tea, and sweet pastries are popular sites for socializing. Self-serve cafeterias (**bar mleczny** or “milk bars”) offer inexpensive meals. Restaurants do not automatically add a service fee and wait staff may expect a tip of about 10% for good service.

Health Overview

Poles' overall health has improved in recent decades, primarily due to increased government investment. Between 1990-2024, infant mortality (the proportion of infants who die before age 1) decreased dramatically from 15 to 4.9 deaths per 1,000 live births. Meanwhile, maternal mortality reduced from 17 to 2 deaths per 100,000 live births. Life expectancy at birth increased from about 71 to 77 years, below the US and European Union averages of 81 years. While Poles generally have access to free, modern healthcare, the quality of care diminishes significantly in rural areas, where facilities are sparse, understaffed, and ill-equipped.



Traditional Medicine

Traditional medicine consists of the knowledge, practices, and skills derived from a native population's beliefs, experiences, and theories. Traditional Polish medicine uses herbal and other remedies, not surgical methods, to identify and treat the causes of illness. Knowledge of natural remedies is widespread, particularly among older generations. Many Poles supplement modern therapies with traditional treatments, with some Poles relying entirely on alternative remedies to treat common ailments such as coughs, colds, allergies, and digestive issues.

Herbal products are widely available in pharmacies and stores, while street merchants commonly sell a variety of homemade herbal medicines. Patients may also seek alternative therapies at "health resorts" – spas offering a range of natural therapeutic services such as medicinal baths and mud or salt treatments. Other therapies include acupuncture (the process of inserting long, thin needles into a patient's skin), cupping (the process of applying heated cups to the skin to extract impurities and improve circulation), and homeopathy (a form of alternative medicine developed in 18th-century Germany in which a patient ingests diluted plant, mineral, and animal substances to trigger the body's natural system of healing).

Modern Healthcare System

Poland's Ministry of Health oversees the national healthcare system, regulating industry-wide requirements and standards, controlling health spending, and managing large, central hospitals. The healthcare system is predominantly funded by the



National Health Fund (NHF), a compulsory national health insurance system. General practitioners provide primary and preventative care, treat chronic illnesses, and act as their patients' gatekeepers to more advanced or specialized services,

such as oncology, dermatology, and gynecology. In 2023, Poland had 894 publicly accessible general hospitals.

Healthcare System Challenges: Although the NHF covers nearly 94% of the population and guarantees free access to a broad range of medical and dental services, high out-of-pocket expenses for medication, medical devices, and some medical procedures force some Poles to forgo or delay treatment. Concentrated in cities, public hospitals and clinics tend to be outdated, poorly equipped, and understaffed. The consequent high demand for treatment drives physicians and nurses in public facilities to work long hours, while concurrently causing many patients to wait for long periods before receiving care.

While private facilities offer timely primary and specialist care, they are unaffordable for many Poles. Moreover, corruption permeates Poland's healthcare industry. Bribery is especially prevalent in public facilities, where patients may seek faster or preferential treatment from doctors by paying additional fees. Quality of care further diminishes in rural areas, where clinics offer limited medical procedures and generally underserve rural dwellers.

Some physicians and nurse choose to practice outside of Poland, attracted by better working conditions, higher pay, and

opportunities for professional advancement. Poland's aging population is likely to add significant strain to the already overburdened national healthcare system in coming decades. In 2022, nearly 51% of Poles expressed significant dissatisfaction in national health services, notably care provided in public facilities.

Health Challenges

As in most developed countries with aging populations, the prevalence of chronic and non-communicable "lifestyle" diseases has increased, and they now account for about 74% of all deaths. In 2022, the top causes of death were cardiovascular diseases (36%) and cancer (21%), followed by respiratory diseases infections, and digestive diseases. Preventable "external causes," such as car accidents, suicides, drownings, falls, and drug use resulted in about 4% of deaths, lower than the US rate (6%). Notably, tobacco and alcohol consumption in Poland is higher than in neighboring European countries, resulting in elevated levels of associated diseases, such as respiratory illnesses and liver cirrhosis. Communicable diseases, like tuberculosis and hepatitis, infectious and parasitic diseases, and HIV/AIDS account for about 12% of deaths while ill-defined diseases account for 9%.

Non-fatal yet common health issues afflicting Poles include low back and neck



pain, high blood pressure, arthritis, migraines, stomach ulcers, anxiety, and depression. Further, insufficient physical activity and unhealthy eating habits have led to increased rates of obesity. In 2022, about 19% of Polish adults were obese, lower than the US rate of 33% but higher than that of the EU (15%). In an effort to educate Poles on the dangers of unhealthy lifestyles, the Polish government enacted an awareness program in 2016 to promote healthy behaviors and reverse high rates of obesity, smoking, and other unhealthy habits.

11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

Overview

For centuries, most Poles subsisted as peasants or serfs (see *History and Myth*) in an agrarian-based economy. Other Poles worked in the region's salt and coal mines. While Poland experienced some industrialization and economic growth as an independent nation between the world wars, its economy was destroyed during World War II (WWII). Following the war, Poland pursued economic policies prioritizing heavy industrialization and limited agricultural collectivization modeled on the centrally planned Soviet system.



Throughout the 1970s-80s Poland's economy was stagnant. Alternating attempts at economic integration with Europe and the USSR produced limited growth and some increase in Poles' standard of living. Meanwhile, repeated food price increases sparked protests and strikes. The 1980s saw a severe financial crisis, with the country teetering on bankruptcy due to a swollen government deficit and hyperinflation. The population suffered significant hardships, notably food shortages and scarcity (see *History and Myth*).

Poland's transition from a centrally-planned economy to a free-market system after the 1989 end of communism was painful. Following the advice of international lending organizations, the government initiated a "shock therapy" that froze wages, removed price controls, and privatized state-owned enterprises. By 1991, the country had entered a severe recession, with GDP contracting by 7%.

These years saw a continued decrease in industrial and agricultural output combined with increased unemployment. Nevertheless, the rate of inflation began to decrease, and by 1992 Poland saw economic progress, averaging 5% growth in

GDP from 1992-2000. Significantly, the 1994 Mass Privatization Program allowed regular Poles to purchase stock in newly-privatized large and medium-sized industries, thereby avoiding much of the corruption that marred the privatization process in other post-communist East European countries. By 2001, privately-owned enterprises comprised some 70% of GDP. Despite these notable achievements, the conversion from a centrally-planned economy to the free market was still difficult for many Poles. Unemployment crested at almost 20% in 2002.

With one of Europe's fastest-growing economies, Poland gained accession to the European Union (EU) in 2004, bringing both significant financial support and further economic integration with Western Europe. Buoyed by the advantages brought by EU membership, Poland's unemployment dropped to 7% in 2007. Poland weathered the 2008-09 global financial crisis well, even continuing to expand and becoming the only European country to avoid a recession during this period.

Although unemployment grew to 10% in 2013, growth continued



to average 3% per year between 2011-22. Real GDP growth declined to 0.2% in 2023 due to higher energy prices as a result of Russia's war against Ukraine, weaker domestic demand and a deteriorating external environment, before

recovering to 3.1% in 2024. Once a major problem, unemployment was just 3% in 2024, below the EU average of 5.9%.

Although Poland has proven to be a post-communism success story, it still faces serious economic challenges. Per capita income has grown rapidly yet remains just 75% of the EU average. Further, Poland faces a shrinking labor pool driven by emigration, a low birth rate, and government policies reducing retirement age.

Since coming to power in 2015, Poland's Law and Justice Party (PiS – see *Political and Social Relations*) has pursued a nationalist and populist economic platform. The PiS-led government has emphasized economic independence from foreign control, re-nationalizing Poland's second-largest bank in 2016 with the result that both of Poland's leading banks are now under state control. Populist economic measures include lowering the retirement age from 67 to 65 years for men and 60 for women and implementing the Family 500+ program providing families monthly subsidies for every second and additional child.

Services

Accounting for about 58% of GDP and 63% of employment, the services sector is the largest and most significant segment of the Polish economy. Key components include retail, financial services, tourism, and business services.

Business Services: Poland has become a world leader in this sub-sector, emerging as a popular destination for offshored business centers thanks to its modern infrastructure, Central European time zone, and well-educated, English-speaking populace (see *Language and Communication*).

Tourism: Since 2021, when Poland eased the COVID-related restrictions, tourism has continued to improve. Approximately 77.7 million tourists visited with a GDP contribution of 4.1% in 2023. Foreign tourists, predominantly Germans, visit a variety of cultural and historical attractions, such as the cities of Warsaw, Wrocław, and Kraków; nature areas such as the Tatra Mountains and the Białowieża Forest; and historical sites related to WWII, such as Auschwitz and Treblinka (see *History and Myth*).



Industry

Even as industry has declined in importance since the communist era, it remains the second-largest economic sector, accounting for about 30% of GDP and employing 30% of the labor force.

Manufacturing: Manufacturing makes up some 17% of GDP. Poland is a major manufacturer of machinery and transport equipment, metals, industrial chemicals, and textiles. Nevertheless, by some estimates Poland's manufacturing sector is only half as productive as those in other EU countries. Poland's fish-processing industry one of the EU's largest, with the country importing and processing some 600,000 tons of fish then re-exporting over 125,000 tons annually, mostly to Germany.

Mining: Once the economic driver of Poland's industry, the mining sub-sector today is significantly reduced yet still economically viable. Poland is the world's ninth-largest producer of hard coal; the world's third-largest producer of rhenium (used in the production of gasoline and jet engines); the world's fifth-largest producer of silver; and the world's 13th-largest producer of copper. While all of Poland's coal is consumed domestically, other minerals are exported, mostly to the EU and China.

Shipbuilding: World-famous as the birthplace of the Solidarity movement (see *History and Myth*), Poland's shipyards were once central to the nation's economy. Even throughout the 1990s, Poland's shipyards produced some 30-40 new ships each year and sustained some 25,000 jobs in 1999. In 2008, the European Commission ruled that Poland's shipyards were receiving illegal subsidies, incurring a €2 billion fine. This decision devastated the industry, with employment dropping to less than 10,000 a year later. As of 2024, with 25,000 boats



leaving the factories each year, Poland is the 11th largest boatbuilder in Europe. Poland's shipbuilding industry is valued at \$960.45 million.

Agriculture

Historically the main component of the economy, agriculture today makes up just 3% of GDP and employs 8% of the labor force. While some 36% of Poland's land is arable and comprises Europe's fourth-largest area, the

agricultural sector has remained relatively inefficient due to small farm sizes, a lack of advanced technology, and a focus on low value-added produce. Nevertheless, the sector remains productive. In 2023, Poland was one of the EU's leading producer of fruit. It ranked first in the production of apples, cherries, raspberries, currants, and gooseberries, and third in frozen vegetables which include carrots and cabbage.



Forestry: With over 31% of its territory covered in woodlands, Poland has a robust forestry industry. An important wood-products exporter, Poland is the EU leader in the production of fiberboard and the world's second-largest exporter of furniture.

Fishing: In 2023, Poland's fishing fleet consisted of 842 vessels harvesting over 127,620 tons of cod, sprat, herring, salmon, sea trout, and flatfish. Poland's fishing fleet comprises a local Baltic fleet and a long-distance fleet operating off the coast of Africa. Inland aquaculture produced almost 42,000 tons of fish in 2023, mostly consisting of carp, a popular traditional food (see *Sustenance and Health*).

Currency

Poland's currency is the **złoty** (zł), issued in 6 banknote values (10, 20, 50, 100, 200, 500) and 3 coins (1, 2, 5). The **złoty** subdivides into 100 **groszy** which are issued in 6 coin values (1, 2, 5, 10, 20, 50). The exchange rate has held relatively steady in recent years with \$1 worth about 4.00zł (1zł is about 25¢).

Foreign Trade

Totaling \$471.6 billion in 2023, Poland's exports primarily consisted of vehicle parts/accessories, electric batteries, plastic products, cars, seats sold to Germany (25%), the UK (6%), Czechia (6%), France (6%), and Italy (5%). In the same year, imports totaling \$423.8 billion were comprised of crude petroleum, cars, garments, vehicle parts/accessories, plastic products from Germany (22%), China (12%), Italy (5%), The Netherlands (4%), and the US (5%).

European Union

Membership in the EU (see *Political and Social Relations*) provides a large common market for exports, a more secure business environment, and easier access to investment and development funds. Overall, the EU accounted for more than 75% of Poland's total exports in 2023.

An overwhelming majority of Poles supports EU membership. Nevertheless, the PiS-led government is skeptical of certain EU



directives and policies. PiS is especially reluctant to adopt the Euro, the EU's currency, since the government's monetary independence during the 2008-09 global financial crisis enabled it to withstand the crisis better than any other

EU member. Although Poland is treaty-bound to adopt the Euro, there is no fixed date for that occurrence.

In addition to condemnation of PiS's judiciary purge in 2018 (see *Political and Social Relations*) the EU also has objected to what it considers Poland's illegal logging in the Białowieża Forest, a protected area home to unique plant and animal species, notably Europe's only wild bison. In 2018, the two sides had attempted negotiation, but logging resumed in 2021.

Foreign Aid

Poland has been a top beneficiary of EU aid, receiving some €246 billion since joining the EU in 2004. Some 2/3 of funds are earmarked for regional projects such as public transportation, sewage systems, and research centers, while the remaining funds go to agriculture and rural development projects. Poland received roughly \$61.96 million from the US in 2023. In 2023, Poland provided some \$2.58 billion in official development assistance, mainly to Polish Aid partner countries (Belarus, Ethiopia, Georgia, Kenya, Lebanon, Moldova, Palestine, Senegal, Tanzania, and Ukraine).

12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

Overview

Poland's physical infrastructure lags that of Western Europe, yet new upgrade projects are forthcoming. Poles enjoy relatively free speech and unrestricted Internet access, yet some laws and practices have recently restricted press freedoms.

Transportation

While many Poles use privately-owned vehicles, others also travel by bus, train, tram, taxi, bicycle, or foot. Warsaw has an underground metro, and all of Poland's major cities have efficient and reliable mass transit systems such as buses and streetcars that operate all night. High-speed trains serve major cities, while regular trains and buses provide service to smaller communities and international destinations.



Poland's central location in Europe and its ports on the Baltic Sea make it a central hub for international trade. Nevertheless, transportation infrastructure is in poor condition outside of major cities. Consequently, the European Union (EU) and the Polish government have invested heavily in upgrading roadways and railways.

Roadways: Poland has some 266,172 mi of roads, 75% of them paved. While roadways in and between major cities are well-maintained, most rural roads are in poor condition and often unpaved, making them unsuitable for commercial use. From 2014-2023, the government planned to invest \$36.6 billion in road infrastructure.

Railways: Poland has over 12,026 mi of railways that connect its cities and towns with the rest of Europe. Since the end of communism in 1989 (see *History and Myth*), passenger and cargo volume has decreased significantly. Today, the state-owned **Polskie Koleje Państwowe** (Polish State Railways) operates most of Poland's trains. Long-distance service includes

high-speed rail from Warsaw to Gdynia, Kraków, Katowice, and Wrocław, and direct international connections to Berlin, Prague, Budapest, and Vienna.

Ports and Waterways: Poland has over 2,400 mi of navigable waterways. Its largest Baltic Sea ports are Gdynia, Szczecin-Świnoujście, and Gdańsk, the latter is the Baltic's largest container port. Ferry service connects Poland with Germany and Sweden.

Airways: Poland has 126 airports, 87 with paved runways. The largest, Warsaw Chopin Airport, served almost 21.3 million passengers in 2024. Poland's national carrier, LOT airlines, is majority-owned by the government.



Energy

Historically, Poland has relied on its significant reserves of high-quality coal for energy generation (see *Economics and Resources*). Despite diversification efforts, Poland still generates about 73% of its energy from fossil fuels, some 61% of that from coal. The remaining 27% comes from renewable sources, such as biomass, wind, hydroelectric, and solar. The Polish government has pursued several projects aimed at decreasing its reliance on Russia for oil and natural gas. These projects include the development of 2 nuclear power plants, the 2015 construction of a Liquefied Natural Gas import terminal at Szczecin-Świnoujście, and a network of regional oil pipelines.

Media

While Poland's Constitution protects freedom of speech and press, in practice the media experience significant restrictions. By law, support of activities against government policy, morality, or the common good, or that are offensive to Christianity are punishable with fines. Further, speech that promotes fascism, communism, or anti-Semitism is punishable with fines and jail time. In 2017, a privately-owned television channel was found guilty under these laws and forced to pay hefty fines for its coverage of anti-government demonstrations.

Since coming to power in 2015 (see *History and Myth*), the ruling PiS has moved to exert greater control over the press. For example, PiS created a new National Media Council and granted it the power to fire public media employees, with some 100 journalists subsequently resigning or facing dismissal. The party also recently forced state-owned companies to withdraw advertising from media outlets that have been critical of the government. Meanwhile, legislation passed in 2018 criminalizes accusations of collective responsibility against Poland for Nazi German war crimes. The law has been interpreted to refer to the term “Polish” to describe World War II-era concentration camps located in Poland. This law has been especially controversial and attracted international attention.



Print Media: Poland's 2 largest dailies are *Fakt* and *Gazeta Wyborcza*. As with domestic publications, these papers are partly owned by foreign interests, which has led the government to limit foreign ownership of media companies. Newspapers are also available in English and German.

TV and Radio: The public *Telewizja Polska* network broadcasts many of Poland's most popular TV programs, with 2 national channels, a regional channel, and 4 cable and satellite channels. State-owned *Polskie Radio* operates 5 national radio stations. Privately-owned stations include *Radio RMF*, *Radio Zet*, and the Catholic *Radio Maryja*.

Telecommunications

In 2023, Poland's modern telecommunications network consisted of about 13 landline and 132 mobile phone subscriptions per 100 people.

Internet: Poland has a relatively modern Internet infrastructure, although its reach is somewhat limited. Around 86% of Poles regularly use the Internet, while the country had about 26 fixed broadband subscriptions and 137 mobile broadband subscriptions per 100 people in 2023. While Poles enjoy unrestricted access to the Internet, the government may block websites it suspects of having connections to terrorism.



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