



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

► EUROPE

## BACKGROUND

**Land and Climate.** The name *Polska* (Poland) means “land of fields.” The northern and central landscape is dominated by the North European Plain, whose flat expanse extends across the country from Germany to Ukraine. Impressive mountains run along the southern border: the Tatry (in the Western Carpathians) and Sudety Ranges are home to skiing and resort areas. Forests (both deciduous and coniferous) cover nearly one-fourth of the land. About 47 percent of the total land area is suitable for cultivation. Poland’s location and flat terrain have made it vulnerable to territory-seeking armies throughout history, and its borders have changed several times. Covering 120,728 square miles (312,685 square kilometers), the total land area today is about the size of New Mexico.

The climate is temperate, with mild summers; however, it is susceptible to extreme temperature variations within short periods of time. Winters are generally cold, and precipitation is common throughout the year. The Poles say one must always carry an umbrella because the weather can change instantly. Air and water pollution, as well as deforestation, threaten the country’s natural beauty.

**History.** The Poles are descendants of a Slavic people who settled between the Oder and Vistula Rivers before the time of Christ. King Mieszko I adopted the Roman Catholic faith in A.D. 966. In the late 14th century, Polish life and culture flourished under King Kasimir the Great. Poland combined with Lithuania in the late Middle Ages, creating a mighty empire that was a major power in Europe. Poland’s 1791 constitution, the second in the world, was patterned after the U.S. Constitution and gave freedom to the serfs. Political infighting among the ruling nobles and other factors weakened the monarchy, and in 1795, Poland was invaded and partitioned by Prussia,

Austria, and Russia. For the next 125 years of foreign occupation, the Roman Catholic Church and Polish exiles preserved Polish identity and culture.

Poland became a nation again in 1918, at the end of World War I. Unfortunately, the country had little chance to stabilize, as the German army invaded in 1939. Within days of the German invasion to the west, the Soviets invaded from the east, and Poland was again partitioned. More than six million Poles died during World War II, including three million Polish Jews who died in the Holocaust. The Soviets were given administrative control over the regions liberated from German occupation when Germany was defeated. Elections were held, but by 1948 a Soviet-backed communist government was in firm control and the country’s political system came to be patterned after that of the Soviet Union, with some exceptions (such as land ownership and matters of religion).

In 1981, following a series of crippling strikes and the formation and activity of the Solidarity labor union, General Wojciech Jaruzelski declared martial law and jailed several Solidarity leaders. The *Sejm* (Parliament) outlawed Solidarity. Martial law was lifted in 1983, and Lech Walesa, the leader of the still-outlawed Solidarity union, received the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of his efforts to win freedom and a better standard of living for the Polish people.

In April 1989, the government legalized Solidarity and implemented government changes. In June, many Solidarity members won parliamentary seats, and Solidarity official Tadeusz Mazowiecki became prime minister. The new democratic government began moving toward a market economy. A bold economic program, referred to as “shock therapy,” was instituted in 1990. It caused prices to rise sharply and led to

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high unemployment. Jaruzelski resigned to speed political reform, and voters elected Walesa president in late 1990. After nearly a year in power, Walesa came under increasing criticism for unemployment and economic recession. He eventually lost parliamentary support for his economic reforms. Former Communists gained control of Parliament in 1993 and have slowed the course of economic reform.

In November 1995, former Communist official Aleksander Kwasniewski narrowly defeated Walesa in runoff presidential elections. Kwasniewski pledged to pursue Poland's goals to join the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In March 1999, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic formally joined NATO. An uncompetitive agricultural system, high unemployment, and corruption were obstacles in the path to EU membership, but the country was invited to join in 2002 and was incorporated in May 2004.

### THE PEOPLE

**Population.** The population of Poland is 38.6 million and is shrinking slightly. Urbanization is relatively high; about 65 percent of the population lives in cities. The country is also very homogeneous: almost 98 percent of the people are of Polish origin. Germans living in Silesia (an area bordering Germany) comprise 1.3 percent of the population and are the largest minority group. Poland is providing its people more access to resources needed for personal advancement; however, opportunities for some are still limited.

**Language.** Polish is the official language. Smaller ethnic groups may also speak their own languages. Though a Slavic tongue, Polish uses a modified Latin alphabet; a few unique characters look like Latin letters with accent markings but are distinct letters. Written Polish emerged in the 12th century but did not flourish until the 16th century, when it began to overtake Latin, which was used by the ruling class. Although Polish was banned during partition periods, Poles around the world preserved it as a matter of patriotism. Russian was taught until 1989 but is no longer used. English and German are the most popular second languages, an indication of the influence of Western culture.

**Religion.** The overwhelming majority of Poles (around 95 percent) belong to the Roman Catholic Church, which has had great influence in the country since Poland was Christianized in the 10th century. About 75 percent of Poles consider themselves practicing Catholics although the country's Catholic information agency reports that only 10 percent regularly attend Mass and abide by the Church's precepts. Catholic ceremonies (baptism, First Communion, weddings, and funerals) are marked with elaborate family gatherings. Because the Catholic Church is a strong and unified entity, it has played an important political role in the past. The church in Poland historically has been nationalistic and patriotic, championing the cause of the people while under communism. The Catholic pope, John Paul II, is a native Pole.

Catholicism's influence in Poland is being debated. Some Poles prefer that laws and social customs remain secular, while others would like them to more fully reflect Catholic values. Other churches represented in Poland include the Russian Orthodox, various Protestant faiths, and the Uniate faith (a combination of Russian Orthodox practices and loyalty to papal authority). Foreign missionaries are also present.

**General Attitudes.** Polish people value individualism, practicality, and self-reliance (exercised on an extended-family level). They place great emphasis on the family, tradition, and

education. Poles are generally outspoken, especially in private circles. They are straightforward and realistic, sometimes cynical. People value generosity and do not regard highly those who are not willing to share their time, resources, or power. Poles are proud of their cultural heritage and their ability to survive war, territory losses, and subordination to other nations. During periods of foreign domination, the Poles looked to their heritage as proof that they were not a conquered or subordinate people. Prior to World War II, the Polish noble class considered itself better than the occupying forces, which gave Poles the desire to maintain their culture and language.

Poland's new democracy and transition to a free market have tarnished some hopes. Many Poles express concern that they did not expect freedom to be so painful. Still, despite many of the poor having been better off under communism, only a minority expresses a desire to return to the old system. Most recognize the potential of a free-market economy.

**Personal Appearance.** Men and women like to be well dressed in public. Polish women pay careful attention to their appearance. Polish men generally dress conservatively, while younger women follow European styles. Businesspeople wear conservative suits or dresses. Denim jeans are especially common among young people and in academic and artistic circles. Jackets and caps with U.S. college or sports-team emblems are popular. Older rural women continue to wear a scarf around the head, a full skirt, and thick stockings. Clothing is expensive, so some Poles make their own clothes; secondhand stores are also popular. Children are expected to be clean and well groomed in school.

### CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

**Greetings.** Adult males and teenagers usually shake hands upon meeting. Women greet each other with kisses or handshakes. Close friends greet by kissing the right, left, and then right cheeks. At social and business gatherings, Poles greet each guest personally, women first. A man might kiss the hand of an older or younger woman, but not the hand of a woman near his age. When introducing a man, one uses *Pan* (Mr.) before the last name; for a woman, the term is *Pani* (Mrs.). One addresses a professional person by title and last name. The title is used alone in formal conversation or in business. Between adults, first names are used only by mutual consent.

Friends greet each other with *Cześć*, a way of saying "Hi." Common Polish greetings include *Dzień dobry* (Good day), *Dobry wieczór* (Good evening), and *Do widzenia* (Good-bye). *Dziękuję* (Thank you) often precedes an answer about how one is doing. When Poles sign their name, they sign their family name first and then their given name.

**Gestures.** Poles frequently gesticulate while conversing, whether to emphasize a point or to express emotion. Pointing is not impolite. Poles hold both thumbs in closed fists to wish others good luck. Blinking both eyes can signify romantic interest. Placing an index finger next to the nose indicates that the words just spoken are not quite true or may be a joke. Personal space tends to be closer in Poland than in the United States. Young females who are close friends often hold hands while walking. Passengers usually help the elderly and mothers with baby carriages get on and off of buses or trams. Discourteous people are called *prymitywny* (primitive).

**Visiting.** Unannounced visits are common among friends and relatives, particularly in rural areas where telephones are less common. Unarranged visits generally do not last more than a few hours. More formal, longer visits are arranged in advance.

Poles often invite friends over for dinner or just for cake and tea. They also like to have formal parties on special occasions. Sunday or weekend family gatherings occur regularly. Weekend visits may last until 6 a.m. in areas where buses do not run between 11 p.m. and 6 a.m.

For even a brief arranged visit, guests customarily give hosts a bottle of wine or vodka or an odd number of flowers (an even number is for sad occasions). They unwrap flowers before giving them to the hostess. Red roses express romantic feelings. White chrysanthemums are reserved for wakes or funerals. Guests are nearly always offered tea or coffee; it is common to politely refuse at first and then accept when the hosts insist. Guests may be entertained at a *kawiarnia* (café), which offers pastries, coffee, and its own specialties. Such visits often last several hours. However, people more commonly entertain in the home because going out is expensive.

**Eating.** Although schedules are changing with society, Poles generally eat breakfast between 6:30 and 8 a.m. Many people eat a second breakfast (e.g., a sandwich) around 10 a.m. Some families expect to gather for the main meal at 3 p.m. and enjoy the lighter evening meal (coffee or tea and sweet rolls) between 6 and 8:30 p.m.

Poles eat in the continental style, with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right. They keep both hands (but not the elbows) above the table during the meal. It is polite to leave a little food on the plate at the end of a meal to indicate that one's hunger has been satisfied. Conversation during the meal is minimal, but it is polite to sit around the table just after eating to talk.

In restaurants, one requests the bill from the waiter and pays at the table. Tips generally are expected. The host may toast a guest with vodka or wine, served between courses. It is appropriate for the guest to return the gesture later in the meal.

## LIFESTYLE

**Family.** The family is Poland's most important social unit. The average family has one or two children, although rural families often have three or four. The father, traditionally a dominant authority figure, demands obedience yet wants his children ultimately to be independent and have self-discipline. Children are given considerable responsibility from an early age. Because both parents usually work outside the home, children often fix their own breakfasts and go to school by themselves. Older children clean, sometimes cook, and often care for younger siblings. The economic situation of most families demands the equal involvement of both parents in raising the family and working outside the home, although women still bear most responsibility for homemaking. Women comprise nearly half of the labor force. The elderly often live with their adult children and provide child care for grandchildren.

**Dating and Marriage.** Young people who start working after the minimum required schooling marry earlier than those who continue their education. Women usually marry between ages 18 and 20; men at age 21. Those who go to technical schools and universities usually marry after age 25. Because housing is expensive and in short supply, parents of the couple often give financial assistance and allow the couple to live in their home for the first few years. Poles wed in religious and civil ceremonies and enjoy traditional celebrations. Living together before marrying is discouraged, as is divorce.

**Diet.** While the early urban breakfast is often light, many rural Poles eat more substantial food (e.g., hot cereal). The main meal consists of soup, meat or fish, salad, and potatoes. Ice

cream or pastries are eaten for a late-afternoon snack. Bread, dairy products, and canned fish are plentiful. People purchase bread several times a week, sometimes even daily. Only those who live far from a store eat bread that is more than two days old. Common dishes include *pierogi* (stuffed dumplings; stuffings vary), *uszka* (a kind of ravioli), *bigos* (sausage, mushrooms, pickled cabbage), braised pork and cabbage, poppy seed desserts, and cheesecake. Pork is more popular than beef. With the switch to a market economy, more food is available in greater variety, but prices are high and many families spend much of their income on food. Gardens often supply a large portion of a family's food.

**Recreation.** Soccer is popular, but Poles also participate in track-and-field events, cycling, table tennis, skiing, basketball, volleyball, and various individual sports. Bridge is a favorite card game. Attending cultural events and visiting friends are common recreational activities. When Poles go on vacation, it is usually to the mountains, the sea, or the Mazury lake region.

**The Arts.** Poland has a rich tradition of music, art, dancing, and literature. Romantic composer Frédéric Chopin (1810–48), the country's best-known musician, based many of his compositions on traditional Polish folk music. Classical music of all kinds is performed in Poland. Polish groups also tour regularly on the international scene.

Carved wood sculptures are an important Polish folk art. These painted or stained sculptures made of linden wood depict mythic and biblical themes as well as everyday subjects. Ceramics, embroidery, and painting are other well-known Polish folk arts.

Poles highly value literature as a means of expression. Historically, Polish writers used parables and other symbolic forms as a way to avoid government censure. Parables and fables are still popular today.

The fall of socialism in the 1990s brought about a significant decline in government funding for the arts. Urbanization and the mass media are also transforming Poland's cultural arts.

**Holidays.** Official holidays include New Year's Day, Easter (two days), Labor Day (1 May), Constitution Day (3 May), Corpus Christi (in May or June), All Saints' Day (1 Nov.), Independence Day (11 Nov.), and Christmas. All Saints' Day involves cemeteries being decorated with flowers and candles in memory of family, friends, and members of the military. Both the name day (the day celebrating the Catholic saint after whom a person is named) and birthday are celebrated.

Christmas is the most important holiday in Poland. On 6 December, children receive small gifts from St. Nicholas. Then on Christmas Eve, when the first star is sighted, the family gathers for a 12-course, meatless meal that usually includes fresh fish, dishes featuring poppy seeds or mushrooms, a special dessert of fruit cooked in syrup, and other traditional foods. Christmas Day is a quiet holiday spent with the immediate family. On 26 December, Poles visit friends and relax. Nativity scenes and caroling are popular throughout the season. For Easter Saturday, people take a basket of specific foods (ham, eggs, sausages, pieces of bread, etc.) to church to be blessed; then they eat the food Sunday after mass. Easter Monday is known as "Wet Monday," a day for young people to squirt or dump water on each other. Children celebrate the first spring day or "truant day" outside, wearing funny or odd clothing. Other celebrations and local festivals, such as the Folk Art Fair in Kraków, are held throughout the year.

**Commerce.** Banks generally are open from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m., Monday through Friday. Hours vary on Saturday. Stores are

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open from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., Monday through Saturday, although hours vary according to location and function. *Kiosks*, small newsstand shops that offer a variety of goods, are common in cities. Supermarkets in large cities carry fresh meat, produce, and other basic foods. In other areas, these goods are purchased in open-air markets and neighborhood stores. Bread is sold in grocery stores; bakeries sell pastries and other sweets.

## SOCIETY

**Government.** Poland's president (currently Aleksander Kwasniewski) is head of state, and the prime minister is head of government. The president is directly elected for a maximum of two five-year terms. The president appoints the prime minister, who usually is the leader of the majority party or coalition in parliament. Leszek Miller announced his resignation in March 2004 and was replaced later that year. The country's parliament, or National Assembly, has an upper house (100-seat Senate) and a lower house (460-seat *Diet* or *Sejm*). A post-communism constitution was approved in May 1997. Poland is divided into a system of 16 provinces (*województwa*). The voting age is 18. Voting is always held on a Sunday.

**Economy.** Poland is progressing in its transition toward a free-market economy. The period of hardships suffered by the people under the 1990 "shock therapy" plan has been followed by steady economic growth. Foreign investment in Poland hit record levels in 1998 and has remained high. However, the privatization of state-owned industries continues to be slow and painful, particularly for the largely inefficient coal industry. Economic reform has led to increased unemployment. However, the country remains committed to becoming a successful free-market economy and joining the EU.

Most people can afford basic needs, but the gap between rich and poor is expanding quickly. This social problem contributes to political instability and general public distrust. In the past, wealth was associated with corruption because only corrupt Communist officials had wealth. Therefore, today's wealthy, no matter how honest, are viewed with suspicion.

About 28 percent of the labor force is engaged in agriculture, which has always remained in private hands despite attempts at collectivization during the communist-era. However, agriculture only accounts for about 4 percent of the gross domestic product. Important products include grains, sugar beets, oilseed, potatoes, and pork, as well as dairy products. Natural resources include coal, sulfur, silver, natural gas, copper, lead, and salt. Poland has a strong industrial sector and is a major producer of minerals and steel. Tourism is growing rapidly. The currency is the *zloty* (PLN).

**Transportation and Communications.** Public transportation is efficient and inexpensive. Excellent railroad and bus systems connect most cities as well as neighboring countries. Travelers purchase tickets from *kiosks* and, on boarding, punch the tickets in machines mounted near the door. Car ownership has continued to rise dramatically in the past few years, though many Poles do not have cars, and families rarely have more than one car. City traffic is difficult and roads are inadequate; the transportation infrastructure needs improvement to meet the growing needs of individuals and businesses. Warsaw

## DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	35 of 175 countries
Adjusted for women	35 of 144 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$9,450
Adult literacy rate	99 percent (male); 99 (female)
Infant mortality rate	9 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	69 (male); 78 (female)

has a new subway system. Airlines service large cities.

Poles have access to both Polish and foreign television broadcasts. Many have telephones, but the telephone system is underdeveloped and outmoded. Mobile phones outnumber regular phone lines. Internet usage in Poland is increasing.

**Education.** Recent educational reforms mandate a free education for children until the age of 18. The restructured system now requires two additional years of education and includes secondary schooling between elementary and high school. Following nine years of basic education, students choose between a three-year high school and a two-year vocational school. Entrance to a university is determined by exam; about 5 percent of all applicants are accepted into the best schools. A university degree takes five to six years to complete. Two-thirds of dental and medical students are women.

**Health.** The government provides health care to all citizens. Facilities generally are accessible but are not up to Western standards. The poor economy forced hospitals and other clinics to cut some services. However, care is generally adequate. Private care in doctors' offices is better, but one must pay for it. Recent reforms require Poles to see a general practitioner first before going to a specialist.

## AT A GLANCE

### Events and Trends.

- In May 2004, Poland joined the European Union, but the membership has been controversial. Poland, the largest of the 10 new member states, had demanded voting rights nearly equal to those of more populous countries like France and Germany. Just before its induction, Poland began to show signs of backing down on the issue, but Polish leaders also resent EU requirements that Poland reform its agriculture industry or risk having subsidies cut.
- Poland was a major supporter of the U.S.-led campaign in Iraq during 2003 and 2004, sending combat troops and commanding one of three peacekeeping sectors there. However, Poles have been disappointed that their country has received few rebuilding contracts.
- Poland's coalition government split in 2003, leaving Prime Minister Leszek Miller to lead the Democratic Left Alliance in a minority rule. But the faltering economy hurt Miller's popularity, and he announced his resignation in March 2004.

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