



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

The name *Polska* (Poland) means “land of fields.” The northern and central landscape is dominated by the North European Plain, a flat expanse that extends from Germany across Poland to Ukraine and Belarus. 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 half 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 AD 966. In the late 14th century, Polish life and culture flourished under King Kazimierz the Great. Poland combined with

Lithuania in the late Middle Ages to form a mighty empire, which was a major power in Europe. Poland's 1791 constitution, the second in the world, was patterned after the U.S. Constitution and gave state protection 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. However, 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. When Germany was defeated, the Soviets were given administrative control over the regions liberated from German occupation. Questionable elections brought a Soviet-backed Communist government to power in 1947. The country's political system came to be patterned after that of the Soviet Union, with some exceptions (such as allowing some private ownership of land and allowing the practice 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 many 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 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, promising to work toward European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership. In March 1999, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic formally joined NATO. An uncompetitive agricultural system, high unemployment, and corruption were obstacles to EU membership, but the country was incorporated in May 2004.

In 2005, the conservative Law and Justice party came to power, with Lech Kaczynski as president. His identical twin brother, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, became prime minister the next year but was replaced by liberal Donald Tusk after October 2007 elections. In April 2010, President Kaczynski and 96 others, including many government and military leaders, were killed in a plane crash. Bronisław Komorowski, speaker of Parliament, took over as acting president. In July 2010, Komorowski won presidential elections for Kaczynski's replacement.

THE PEOPLE

Population

The population of Poland is nearly 38.5 million and is decreasing slightly. Urbanization is relatively high; about 61 percent of the population lives in cities. The country is also homogeneous: almost 97 percent of the people are of Polish origin. Germans living in Silesia (an area bordering Germany and the Czech Republic) are the largest minority group. Other groups include Belarusians and Ukrainians.

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, used by the ruling class.

Although Polish was banned during partition periods, Poles around the world preserved it as a matter of patriotism. Until 1989, Russian was taught, but it fell out of favor due to anti-Russian sentiment; it is now gaining traction as a

language of business communication. English and German are the most popular second languages, an indication of the influence of Western culture and Germany's proximity to many Polish centers of commerce.

Religion

The majority of Poles (around 90 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 a much smaller percentage regularly attends Mass and abides 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 nationalistic and patriotic role in the past, championing the causes of the people. The former Catholic pope John Paul II was 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. The 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 scarves around their heads, full skirts, 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 greet each other with a handshake. Women usually kiss or shake hands upon meeting. 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.

Gestures

Poles often gesticulate while conversing, either to emphasize a point or 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. Winking one eye indicates that the words just spoken are not quite true or may be a joke. Personal space tends to be closer than in North America. 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 buses or trams. Discourteous people are called *prymatywny* (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.

People remove their shoes when entering a home. 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. Conversation during and after the meal is normal, and it is considered impolite to leave the table before all have finished dining. It is customary to leave a small amount of food on the plate to indicate that one's hunger has been satisfied.

In restaurants, one requests the bill from the waiter and pays at the table. Tips are not generally expected but, if given, they should be included with payment of the bill. 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. Poles have a strong sense of loyalty to their families, especially when it comes to older family members. The average family has one or two children, although rural families often have three or four. An increasing number of Polish children grow up in single-parent families. Polish parents generally demand obedience yet want their children ultimately to be independent and self-disciplined. 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 father was traditionally a dominant authority figure and the main breadwinner. Today, most couples make decisions together. 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. A growing number of women pursue higher education, start their own businesses, and run for government offices.

While in the past the extended family provided an important support network, these relationships have changed in recent years as families are more spread out and the nuclear family becomes the primary focus. Although these bonds have in many ways loosened, extended families remain close and often gather to celebrate holidays.

Children often live at home until they marry or start a family, though many prefer to move out once they finish secondary school, often to attend a university in another city. Parents usually expect to support their children until they are

financially independent, and parents may continue to help financially by paying expenses such as fees for their grandchildren's extracurricular activities. Some elderly people struggle to support themselves solely on their pensions. Grown children may help support them if possible. The elderly often live with their adult children and provide child care for grandchildren. Rest homes are relatively rare in Poland.

Housing

Most Poles live in Soviet-era apartment blocks made of grey concrete. In major cities, investment is going toward Western-style apartment buildings. Families usually own the apartments they live in and pass them down to subsequent generations. Apartment owners generally pay their building's housing association, which manages the building and handles shared utilities (such as garbage disposal). Because apartments are small (one to two bedrooms), parents often sleep in the living room on a bed that is converted to a couch by day, while children share a bedroom. Most apartments have a balcony. Small flower beds can be found immediately outside an apartment block, and apartment dwellers usually have access to town gardens for more extensive gardening.

Free-standing houses, more prevalent in rural and suburban areas, are almost exclusively made of brick. A detached house is a symbol of high status, indicating wealth and prestige. It can take years to build a house, because the owners must either do everything themselves or hire individual people to do each task (install plumbing, wire for electricity, etc). In recent years, a rise in construction has strained cities' infrastructures, as roads, sewers, and heating systems struggle to keep up with demands. As housing prices rise, many people are choosing to live outside the bigger cities.

Furnishings are generally basic and traditional. Most homes have modern appliances such as refrigerators and microwaves. Washing machines are usually located in the bathroom because most models hook up to the tap before running. Walls are often wallpapered, and many people decorate with paintings.

Dating and Marriage

Young people meet at school, sports activities, clubs, and through mutual friends. It is common for young people to date multiple people before settling down with one partner. Most couples date for at least a year before becoming serious. Some young people who start working after the minimum required schooling may marry early, usually between ages 18 and 20 for women and around age 21 for men. However, most people do not marry until at least age 25, waiting until after they have completed their technical or university educations and have entered the job market. Living together outside of marriage is generally frowned upon, largely due to Poland's strong Catholic tradition. However, a growing number of Poles choose to live together before or instead of marrying.

When a couple wishes to become engaged, the man asks the woman's parents for permission to marry her. He purchases an engagement ring to give to the woman. Breaking off an engagement is seen as a serious decision. Both civil

and religious wedding ceremonies are popular. A civil ceremony takes place at the registry office. Couples invite family and friends, say vows, and exchange rings in the presence of a civil authority. In order to get married in a Catholic church, the couple must have been baptized and confirmed. Couples must also register their marriage with the registry office. A growing number of couples choose a *konkordatowy* wedding, in which the church wedding and the legal steps (visiting the registry office) are combined. Couples give their legal documentation to the priest, who later submits it to the registry office. Long engagements are common, and some couples reserve a venue years in advance. Wedding costs are split between the two families. The bride's family usually pays for the food. The groom's family pays for the music, alcohol, and the vehicle that carries the couple.

Weddings are generally held on Saturdays. After the wedding ceremony (whether religious or civil), a festive reception is held at a restaurant or reception hall. The party often continues late into the night, sometimes until dawn. A few traditional wedding rituals continue to be practiced today. On the way to the church, young friends of the bride may "block" the road in front of the couple's car, refusing to move until given bottles of vodka. After the wedding, guests throw rice and coins over the couple. It is said that whoever gathers up the most coins will rule the home. When the couple arrives at the reception, the groom carries the bride over the threshold. Guests make toasts to the new couple. The bride and groom's first dance was traditionally a waltz, but today most couples choose a favorite song for this dance. The *oczepiny* takes place at midnight. Young, unmarried men and women dance together. Then the bride throws her garter or veil to the young women and the groom throws his tie to the young men. Those who catch the objects are said to marry soon. During the *oczepiny*, the bride is said to symbolically become a married woman. For many, this is the highlight of the wedding.

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. Traditionally frowned upon, divorce is now more accepted, though some stigma is still associated with divorced women. The divorce rate is higher in urban areas than in rural areas.

Life Cycle

When a woman gives birth, friends and relatives visit the home to welcome the baby and congratulate the parents. Visitors often bring gifts like flowers and champagne. People may also bring sweets to represent hope for a sweet life for the baby. A child's godparents (*kum* for godfather and *kuma* for godmother) are chosen from among the parents' friends and relatives. Godparents are expected to always be present in a child's life and to help and support the child when needed. Traditionally, parents affixed red ribbons to their children's cribs and strollers in hopes of warding off bad fortune. Although few people believe this today, many parents still follow the tradition. Parents usually stick with traditionally Polish names for their children; consequently, many people share the same names (for instance, Anna for girls and Piotr or Michal for boys).

The Catholic sacraments are important and marked with elaborate family gatherings. Children are usually baptized when they are two to three months old, though the age varies. After the ceremony, friends and relatives gather at the family's home to celebrate. Guests bring gifts for the baby, such as flowers or jewelry. A child's First Communion takes place at around age 9. Girls usually dress in white dresses and wear garlands of fresh flowers and myrtle branches in their hair. Boys often dress in a traditional suit with a white shirt. Children are confirmed at age 15. The occasion is less solemn than other sacraments and is usually celebrated with a meal for the immediate family, grandparents, and godparents at the family's home.

Children are often named after or share a name with a Catholic saint and celebrate both the name day associated with this saint as well as their actual birthday. These celebrations differ from family to family. Some families celebrate the name days only of children. Some adults celebrate name days instead of birthdays. Others celebrate their name day throughout their lives. Name day celebrations are not as significant as birthdays. People generally invite friends and family over for a meal.

People are considered adults at age 18, when they can buy alcohol and enter night clubs. After 18, women may marry without their parents' consent. However, men may not marry without their parents' consent until age 21. This important birthday is generally celebrated with a family party at home and a separate party with friends, usually held at a night club.

There are a variety of traditional customs associated with death. People may light candles, symbolically stop their clocks at the time of death, sit with the body overnight while reciting the rosary, and open windows to allow the spirit of the deceased to leave. Many of these traditions are no longer widely practiced or are only practiced in rural areas. When someone dies, a traditional Catholic funeral service is held. The casket is then carried from the church to an adjacent graveyard followed by a long procession of people singing hymns. Later, extended family members gather for a dinner. The dead are remembered and honored in Polish families. People make frequent trips to cemeteries to leave flowers and candles at the graves of loved ones.

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 a variety of *pierogi* (stuffed dumplings), *uszka* (a kind of ravioli), *bigos* (sausage, mushrooms, pickled cabbage), braised pork and cabbage, *schnitzel* (breaded veal cutlets) and potatoes, 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. Many families spend much of their income on food. Gardens often supply a large portion of a rural family's food.

Recreation

Soccer is the most popular sport. Most towns have a soccer league, and people enjoy watching local teams play and watching professional soccer on television. Poles also participate in track-and-field events, cycling, table tennis, skiing, ski jumping, basketball, volleyball, and various individual sports. Poles enjoy spending time outdoors. Many people enjoy riding bicycles as a form of exercise as well as for transportation. Children spend time at playgrounds and playing sports. Many people enjoy hiking in the countryside and canoeing and kayaking in Poland's rivers.

Bridge is a favorite card game. People also enjoy watching television and DVDs and reading. Poles spend a growing amount of time on the computer and the internet. Attending cultural events, going for walks, gardening, and visiting friends are common recreational activities. In the summer, many people enjoy picking mushrooms in the forests. Mushrooms are carefully examined to avoid poisonous varieties. People often dry a supply of mushrooms to last through the winter.

Poles often choose to vacation within their country. Popular destinations include the mountains, the Baltic coast, or the Mazury lake region. A growing number of people travel abroad for vacations.

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 internationally. Carved wooden 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 value literature as a means of expression. Historically, Polish writers used parables and other symbolic forms 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), Whit Monday (also called Pentecost, celebrated 50 days after Easter), Labor Day (1 May), the Third of May holiday (also called Constitution Day, celebrates the 1791 adoption of Poland's constitution), Corpus Christi (in May or June), Assumption of the Virgin Mary (15 Aug.), All Saints' Day (1 Nov.), Independence Day (11 Nov.), and Christmas.

On All Saints' Day, people decorate cemeteries with flowers and candles in memory of family, friends, and members of the military. Independence Day celebrates Poland's independence gained in 1918. The holiday was banned under Soviet rule and reinstated after Poland regained its independence. The main Independence Day celebrations

take place in Krakow and are broadcast throughout the country by radio and television. The day is celebrated with parades and speeches. Ceremonies honor Poles who died fighting for their country. Homes, businesses, and government buildings are decorated with Polish flags.

A variety of Catholic holidays related to Easter are celebrated. Lent lasts for 40 days, ending the week before Easter. During Lent, Catholics fast at certain times and may give up specific foods and vices. Ash Wednesday marks the first day of Lent. On this day, people attend church, where the priest sprinkles ash over their heads to symbolize repentance. The Thursday before the beginning of Lent is called Fat Thursday. On this day, people eat sweets, particularly doughnuts, in anticipation of Lent. Shrove Tuesday is the day before Ash Wednesday and is considered the last celebration before Lent. In Poland, people attend dances and parties. Night clubs, restaurants, and pubs hold special Shrove Tuesday celebrations. For Easter Saturday, people take a basket of specific foods (such as ham, eggs, sausages, pieces of bread) to church to be blessed; then they eat the food on Sunday after mass. Easter Monday is known as Wet Monday and is celebrated by young people, who throw water on each other.

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.

Patriotic holidays are important as well. Flag Day (2 May) celebrates the Polish flag. On the Third of May holiday, people celebrate the adoption of Poland's constitution by hanging flags, going to church, and attending patriotic concerts and parades.

Children celebrate the first spring day or "truant day" outside, wearing funny or odd clothing. People may burn effigies of Marzanna (the pagan goddess of winter and death) to represent the end of winter. Other celebrations and local festivals, such as the Folk Art Fair in Kraków, are held throughout the year.

SOCIETY

Government

Poland's president (Bronisław Komorowski) is head of state, and the prime minister (currently Donald Tusk) is head of government. The president is directly elected for a maximum of two five-year terms and serves, except in international affairs, a largely representative role. The president appoints the prime minister, who usually is the leader of the majority party or coalition in Parliament. The country's legislature has an upper house (100-seat *Senat*) and a lower house (460-seat *Sejm*). A post-communism constitution was approved in May 1997. Poland is divided into 16 provinces (*województwa*).

The voting age is 18, and 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 developing a strong free-market economy and succeeding within the EU.

The global economic crisis in 2008 caused Poland's previously strong growth to slow to a near stop, although it was one of the few European countries not to fall into recession. The government responded with a plan to stimulate the economy and received a loan from the International Monetary Fund.

Most people can afford basic needs, but the gap between rich and poor is expanding. 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 17 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 accounts for only about 5 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 has a new subway system. Airlines service large cities.

Poles have access to both Polish and foreign television broadcasts. Virtually all Poles have telephones, and the once outmoded telephone system is experiencing development thanks to multinational corporations investing in the industry. Mobile phones outnumber regular phone lines. Internet usage in Poland is increasing.

Education

Education is greatly valued in Poland, and most young people hope to eventually attend universities. Education in public

universities is free. The majority of students attend public schools, but private schools are available. Though education in public schools is free, students must provide their text books, school supplies, and uniforms.

Students begin primary school at age 6, and nearly all children attend. Secondary school starts at age 13 and is divided into two levels: higher and lower. Lower secondary school is mandatory and lasts from age 13 to 15. Higher secondary school lasts from age 15 to 18 and is optional. After lower secondary school, students who choose to continue their education have a number of options: two- or three-year basic vocational schools, three-year general secondary schools, three-year specialized secondary schools, and four-year technical secondary schools. Admission to higher secondary schools is based on students' results on national exams. At the end of higher secondary school, students take an exam called the *matura*, which determines which universities they may attend.

A university degree takes five to six years to complete. Education at public universities is paid for by the state, with the exception of extracurricular classes and courses that students retake. Students pay tuition at private universities. Vocational schools award certification in a certain vocation, based on the students' scores on exams. Many Poles complete post-graduate degrees.

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 services are often better, but one must pay for them. Recent reforms require Poles to see a general practitioner before going to a specialist.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

Embassy of Poland, 2640 16th Street NW, Washington, DC 20009; phone (202) 234-3800; web site www.polandembassy.org. The Polish National Tourist Office, 5 Marine View Plaza, Suite 303 b, Hoboken, NJ 07030; phone (201) 420-9910; web site www.poland.travel.

POPULATION & AREA

Population	38,463,689 (rank=34)
Area, sq. mi.	120,728 (rank=70)
Area, sq. km.	312,685

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	41 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	26 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$17,900
Adult literacy rate	100% (male); 100% (female)
Infant mortality rate	7 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	72 (male); 80 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

ProQuest
 789 East Eisenhower Parkway
 Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106 USA
 Toll Free: 1.800.521.3042
 Fax: 1.800.864.0019
www.culturegrams.com

© 2011 ProQuest LLC and Brigham Young University. It is against the law to copy, reprint, store, or transmit any part of this publication in any form by any means without strict written permission from ProQuest.