

A PORTRAIT IN DATA · 2026

Poland: A Self-Portrait

Who we are by the numbers: economy, science, culture, safety — lights and shadows, always with a source. A portrait of a country the world knows less well than it deserves.

poland.test · version of 2026-08-23

21st

largest economy in the world

nominal GDP USD 1.13 tn (IMF 2026)

+114%

real GDP since 2004

3.6× the EU average

+81%

average wage 2019→2025

+22% in real terms; minimum wage ×2

0.69

homicides per 100,000

7× fewer than the USA; 22nd in the Global Peace Index

24th

in the happiness ranking

up from 48th in 2022

1.14

children per woman

the biggest challenge

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5. Not every trend rises: beer loses 3 litres a year
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2. The biggest climb in the world: Poland 22nd in the Global Peace Index 2026
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4. There is no 'Poland B', there is a Poland growing from different levels: regional GDP
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4. Below 50% for the first time: coal in Polish power generation
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7. A second home for a million: temporary protection for Ukrainians in the EU
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1. Poland versus the EU average in ten indicators
2. Six lights
3. Six shadows

The Poland the world knows is often the Poland of 50 or 100 years ago — poor, agricultural, grey, eastern. The Poland of the 2026 data is different in almost every dimension: the world's 21st-largest economy, the fastest-growing large economy in the Union since the 2004 enlargement, one of the safest countries on the continent, a society with some of the lowest income inequality in Europe, schools teaching above the OECD average, and exports that grew sixfold in two decades.

A self-portrait must also hold the shadows — and it does so by the same method, without dramatising: growing antipathy towards outsiders, low trust, susceptibility to disinformation, the second-highest deficit in the Union, the lowest fertility on record and homes whose prices have run away from wages. Against the world, Poland remains an oasis of calm and relative prosperity; against its own ambitions — a country with a to-do list. Sixteen chapters, a hundred charts, each with a source.

CHAPTER 1

An eagle's-eye view: Poland in 60 seconds

For someone who has heard only half-century-old stereotypes about Poland: a country of 37 million people in the middle of Europe, the world's 21st-largest economy, one of the safest places on the continent — and a portrait that draws itself in numbers, not adjectives.

This document grew out of a simple observation: the Poland the world knows is often the Poland of 50 or 100 years ago — poor, agricultural, grey, eastern. The Poland shown by the data of 2026 is different in almost every dimension. The opening chapter is the eagle's-eye view: a dozen numbers to grasp the scale, eight stereotypes confronted with charts from the later chapters, and twelve names the world knows better than the country they come from. The rest of the document unpacks each of these numbers — with a source.

FIG. 1.1

Poland in twelve numbers

Scale, pace, safety, people — as of 2025/2026

37.3 m

inhabitants

5th in the EU (Statistics Poland, 31 Dec 2025)

312,700 km²

of area

6th in the EU; 7 neighbours, the Baltic

21st

largest economy in the world

nominal GDP USD 1.13 tn (IMF 2026)

+114%

real GDP since 2004

the fastest-growing large EU economy

81%

of the EU average — income per head

52% in 2004 (PPS)

3.1%

unemployment

EU: 6.0% (2025)

0.69

homicides per 100,000

USA: 5.76; 22nd in the Global Peace Index

24th

in the World Happiness Report

up from 48th in 2022

4.48%

of GDP on defence

the most in NATO (2025)

18

UNESCO World Heritage sites

Kraków and Wieliczka on the first list (1978)

22 m

people of Polish descent abroad

in 138 countries

1.14

children per woman

the biggest challenge (2024)

EU member since 2004, NATO since 1999, Schengen since 2007; currency: the złoty

Area about 312,700 km² — the EU's 6th-largest country; 37.3 m inhabitants — 5th-largest

Twelve numbers to know before reading on. Ten of them are lights; one — fertility — is the biggest challenge; one — defence — is a sign of the

times. Each has its chart, its series and its source in the chapters that follow.

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FIG. 1.2

Eight half-century-old myths versus the data of 2026

What is “known” about Poland — and what the numbers say

STEREOTYPE		DATA
“A poor, agricultural country in the East”	21.	largest economy in the world (nominal GDP over USD 1 tn); income per head 81% of the EU average, level with Portugal — chapter 3
“Grey, post-communist, sad”	24th	in the World Happiness Report 2026, above the UK and Canada; up 24 places since 2022 — chapter 12
“Dangerous, like everywhere in the East”	0.69	homicides per 100,000 — seven times fewer than the USA, fewer than Germany and France; 89% of Poles feel safe — chapter 12
“The Polish plumber — cheap labour”	USD 19.8 bn	of IT services exported a year (10× more than in 2010); 138 informatics-olympiad medals from 114 contestants; a minimum wage with Spanish purchasing power — chapters 4–6
“Technologically backward”	2.9 bn	BLIK transactions a year; 97.8% of card payments contactless; 11 m users of a digital ID with the force of an identity card — chapter 5
“Coal and smog”	52%	coal's share of electricity — down from 80% a decade ago; premature deaths from smog halved since 2010 — chapters 12 and 15
“A country people leave”	no. 1	in the EU for first residence permits for ten years running (2013–2022); 1.34 m foreigners work and pay contributions — chapter 14
“Hospitable or hostile to outsiders?” — a complicated truth	961k / 43%	people from Ukraine under temporary protection (2nd in the EU) — and 43% of Poles declaring antipathy towards Ukrainians (17% in 2023); both numbers are true — chapters 13 and 15

Every row points to a chart in a later chapter; one row deliberately shows a complicated truth

Eight sentences a foreigner most often hears about Poland — and eight numbers that set them straight. Seven stereotypes the data simply void. The eighth row is left deliberately ambiguous:

Poland is at once a country that took in almost a million refugees and a country where antipathy towards them grew from 17% to 43% in three years. A self-portrait has to hold both numbers.

SOURCES

1. Wszystkie wartości pochodzą z wykresów w rozdziałach 3–15 (źródła: IMF, Eurostat, World Happiness Report, Bank Światowy, IOI, BLIK, Forum Energii, EEA, CBOS) — pełna lista na stronie Źródła <<https://polska.tkm.cc/zrodla>> (2026-08)

FIG. 1.3

Twelve Poles the world knows

The selection is subjective, the numbers are not

WHO		WHY THE WORLD KNOWS THEM
Nicolaus Copernicus	1543	De revolutionibus — the Earth orbits the Sun; the start of the scientific revolution
Fryderyk Chopin	642	entries to the 2025 Chopin Competition — the world's most prestigious piano contest, held in Warsaw since 1927
Maria Skłodowska-Curie	2 Nobels	physics 1903 and chemistry 1911 — the only person awarded in two natural sciences; polonium named after Poland
John Paul II	1978–2005	the first non-Italian pope in 455 years; 104 foreign pilgrimages; one of the figures who changed the end of the 20th century
Lech Wałęsa and Solidarity	10 m	union members in 1981 — the largest social movement of post-war Europe; Nobel Peace Prize 1983; the elections of 4 June 1989
Stanisław Lem	30 m	copies in over 40 languages; "Solaris" filmed twice (Tarkovsky 1972, Soderbergh 2002)
Andrzej Wajda and Roman Polański	Oscars	Wajda — honorary Oscar (2000); Polański — Best Director for "The Pianist" (2003); Paweł Pawlikowski — "Ida", Oscar 2015
Andrzej Sapkowski / The Witcher	85 m	Witcher-trilogy games sold (CD PROJEKT) + the Netflix series — the best-known Polish cultural brand of the 21st century
Robert Lewandowski	41	goals in one Bundesliga season (2020/21) — the all-time record; FIFA Player of the Year 2020 and 2021
Iga Świątek	6	Grand Slam titles, 125 weeks at WTA no. 1; the 2025 Wimbledon final won 6–0, 6–0
Olga Tokarczuk	Nobel 2018	the fifth literary Nobel for a writer in Polish (after Sienkiewicz, Reymont, Miłosz, Szymborska)
Sławosz Uznański-Wiśniewski	2025	the second Pole in space — the Ignis mission (Ax-4), 20 days on the ISS, 47 years after Mirosław Hermaszewski

From Copernicus to Świątek: names heard by people who know nothing of Poland — and the number behind each of them

The world knows these people better than the country they come from — the shortest definition of the gap between Poland's economic position and its brand. Copernicus, Chopin and Skłodowska-Curie made it into textbooks; John

Paul II and Wałęsa changed the end of the 20th century; Lem, The Witcher, Lewandowski and Świątek are the brand for a new generation. The choice of names is subjective — the numbers beside them are not.

SOURCES

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4. [ESA — Ignis mission <https://www.esa.int/Science_Exploration/Human_and_Robotic_Exploration/ignis/Ignis_First_space_mission_for_ESA_s_Slawosz_Uznanski-Wisniewski_begins> \(2025-06\)](#)

Solidarity's membership (about 10 m in 1981) and John Paul II's 104 pilgrimages are encyclopaedic values; the other numbers have charts in chapters 6–8.

CHAPTER 2

History and continuity: 1,060 years, 123 of them without a state

1,060 years have passed since the baptism of Mieszko I; for 123 of them Poland was not on the map. Europe's first constitution, one of the earliest acts of religious tolerance, the largest social movement of post-war Europe — and the heaviest war losses relative to population. Continuity survived in institutions and at the Christmas Eve table.

This is not a history textbook — it is a handful of numbers that explain the rest of the document. Why Poland is catching up so hard (it started from the level of a country destroyed in 1945 and closed off for 45 years), why it values security and independence so highly (123 years of partitions, two occupations), where its tradition of tolerance and self-government comes from (the Statute of Kalisz, the Warsaw Confederation, *Nihil novi*), and why the ability to unite in a crisis is the second reason for pride in CBOS surveys. Continuity here is measurable: 97% of Poles still share the Christmas wafer.

FIG. 2.1

1,060 years in sixteen dates

Milestones of statehood and continuity, 966–2025

- 966 • Baptism of Mieszko I — the beginning of the Polish state**
The first royal coronation (Bolesław the Brave) 59 years later, in 1025.
- 1264 • Statute of Kalisz — a charter for the Jews**
Bolesław the Pious grants Jews separate courts and protection; England will expel them in 1290, France in 1306, Spain in 1492.
- 1364 • The Kraków Academy**
Casimir the Great founds Central Europe's second university (after Prague 1348, before Vienna 1365) — today's Jagiellonian University.
- 1505 • Nihil novi — noble democracy**
"Nothing new without consent" of the Sejm: the king makes no law without the chamber of deputies.
- 1569 • Union of Lublin — the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth**
At its peak (1619) about 1 million km² and some 12 million inhabitants — one of Europe's largest states.
- 1573 • Warsaw Confederation — religious peace**
Freedom of worship guaranteed to nobles of all confessions; on UNESCO's Memory of the World register since 2003.
- 1791 • The Constitution of 3 May**
The first codified constitution in Europe, the second in the world after the American one (1787).
- 1795 • Third Partition — 123 years without a state**
Partitions 1772, 1793, 1795; uprisings 1794, 1830, 1863. Poland vanishes from the map until 1918.
- 1918 • 11 November — independence regained**
The Second Republic: 388,634 km², 25.7 m inhabitants (1921); defended at the Battle of Warsaw 1920.
- 1939 • The Second World War**
5.62–5.82 m Polish citizens killed (IPN 2009), about 16–17% of the population; 2.7–2.9 m Polish Jews — about 90% of the community.
- 1944 • Warsaw Uprising — 63 days**
The Home Army: about 390,000 soldiers (1944) — Europe's largest underground army; Warsaw 85–90% destroyed.
- 1980 • Solidarity — 10 million members**
The August Agreements of 31 August 1980; martial law 13 December 1981; the Nobel Peace Prize for Lech Wałęsa 1983.
- 1989 • 4 June — the first partly free elections in the bloc**
Solidarity wins 99 of 100 Senate seats and all 161 contestable Sejm seats; the Round Table Feb–Apr 1989.
- 1999 • NATO — 12 March 1999**
Together with Czechia and Hungary; the Alliance's first post-Cold-War enlargement.
- 2004 • European Union — 1 May 2004**
2003 referendum: 77.5% in favour; Schengen 21 December 2007.
- 2025 • Second presidency of the EU Council**
January–June 2025; 21 years after accession Poland is the Union's 5th country by population and 6th by economy.

Three firsts: the Statute of Kalisz (1264) in a century when England and France were expelling Jews; the Warsaw Confederation (1573) — religious peace, on UNESCO's Memory of the World register; the Constitution of 3 May (1791) — the first in Europe, second in the world

The Kraków Academy (1364) — Central Europe's second university after Prague; the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569) — about 1 million km² at its peak

Sixteen dates, one axis: a state that was at times among Europe's largest, vanished from the map for 123 years, survived two occupations and returned to the West within a single generation. Three of those dates are world firsts — the Kalisz charter, the Warsaw Confederation and the Constitution of 3 May — and from them grows

the Polish tradition of self-government and tolerance which today's data (chapter 13) oblige us to view without idealising.

The axis ends in 2025, but its punchline is contemporary: a country that was a ruin in 1945 and bankrupt in 1989 is, in 2026, the world's 21st-largest economy.

SOURCES

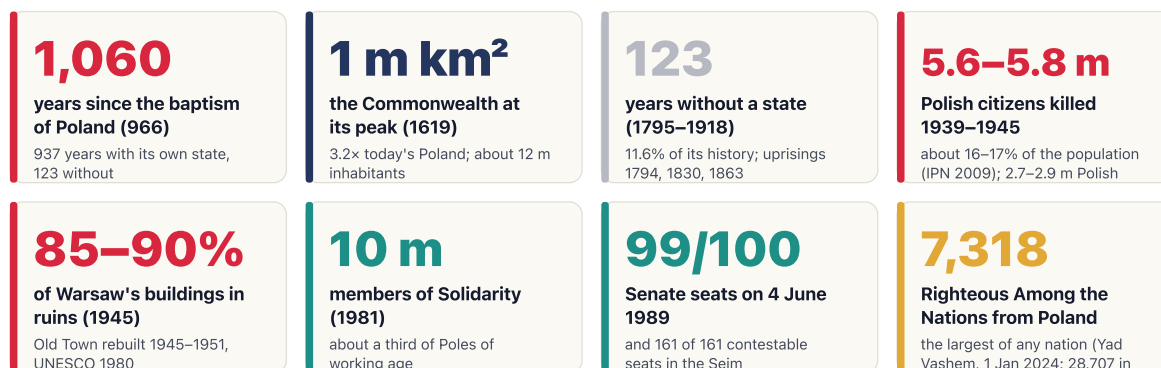
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Uncontested dates from encyclopaedic sources; war losses and Home Army strength are estimates (IPN 5.62–5.82 m; Home Army 380–400k). The claim of the “highest in the world” losses relative to population is widely repeated but contested with regard to Belarus — we state it cautiously.

FIG. 2.2

The survival balance in seven numbers

Size, loss, rebuilding — the numbers that explain the rest of the portrait



Arithmetic on the dates 966–2026: 937 years with a state (88.4%), 123 without (11.6%) — not counting the 1939–1945 occupation or the limited sovereignty of the People's Republic

Seven numbers and one bracket: from a country three times larger than today, through 123 years of non-existence and the heaviest war losses relative to population among European states, to the largest social movement of post-war Europe and the elections that began the end of the Eastern bloc. The largest group of Righteous

Among the Nations — 7,318 Poles honoured by Yad Vashem — stands beside the 2.7–2.9 million Polish Jews murdered: both numbers belong to the same history. Warsaw's Old Town made the UNESCO list not despite being a reconstruction but because of it — as a contribution to the world's conservation doctrine.

SOURCES

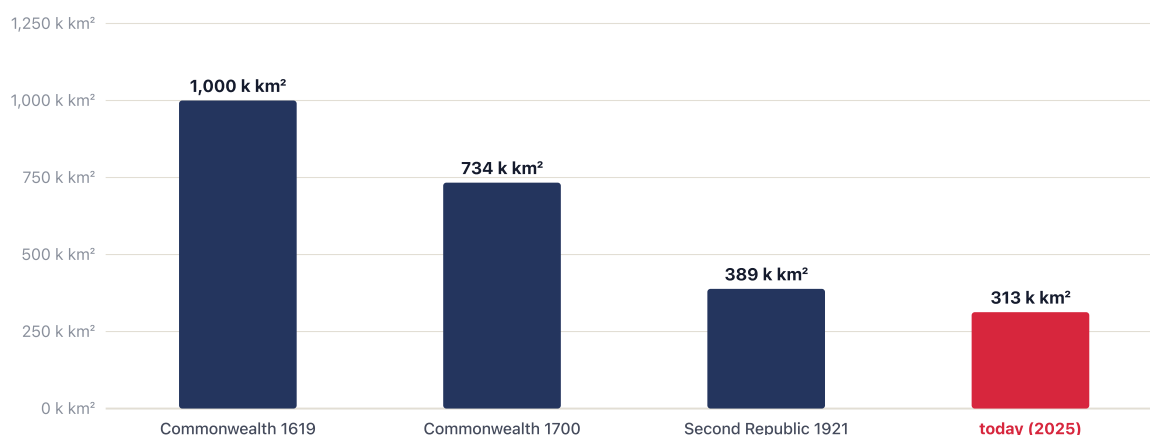
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2. Wikipedia (EN) — Planned destruction of Warsaw (za A. Ciborowski, 1969); Solidarity (Polish trade union); Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Planned_destruction_of_Warsaw> (2026)
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Warsaw's destruction: 85% per UNESCO's justification, 85–90% per the literature (September 1939 up to 10%, the ghetto 1943 up to 15%, the 1944 uprising 25%, planned demolition 40%).

FIG. 2.3

A territory that shrank and was reborn

Area of the Polish state at selected moments, thousand km²



1619: about 1,000,000 km² · 1700: 733,500 km² · 1921: 388,634 km² · today: about 312,700 km²

Borders moved, people and language endured: about 40 m native speakers of Polish worldwide (Ethnologue)

The map of Poland shifted by hundreds of kilometres — eastwards in the 17th century, westwards in 1945 — and a country three times its present size at its peak found itself after 1945 within borders almost without national minorities.

That history explains why Polish identity rests more on language, religion and memory than on territory — and why the number of 22 million people of Polish descent outside the country (chapter 7) is so large.

SOURCES

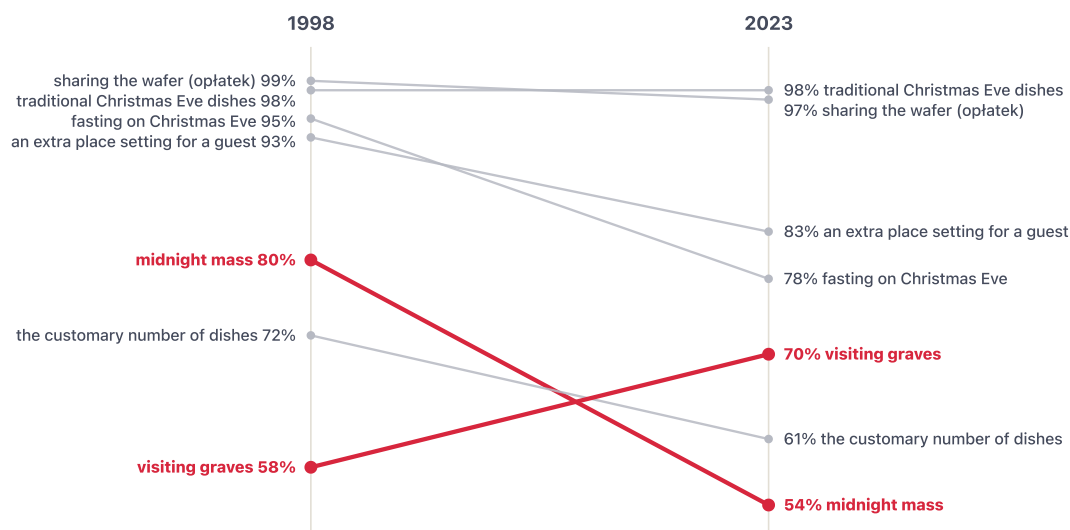
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The 1619 area is approximate (about 1 m km²); today's geodetic area per Statistics Poland.

FIG. 2.4

What survived a quarter-century: Christmas Eve customs 1998 → 2023

Share of Poles declaring a given Christmas Eve custom, %, CBOS, 1998 vs 2023



97% of Poles share the Christmas wafer (1998: 99%), traditional dishes — 98%; visiting relatives' graves over the holidays ROSE from 58% to 70%

Strictly religious customs fade fastest: midnight mass 80% → 54%, fasting on Christmas Eve 95% → 78%

Everyday continuity holds firm where it is familial and weakens where it is strictly religious. The wafer, the shared table and traditional dishes are almost universal — just as a quarter-century ago. Midnight mass, fasting and confession lose

between ten and several dozen points. The only line going up is visiting relatives' graves — the Polish cult of remembrance that on 1 November takes most of the country to the cemeteries.

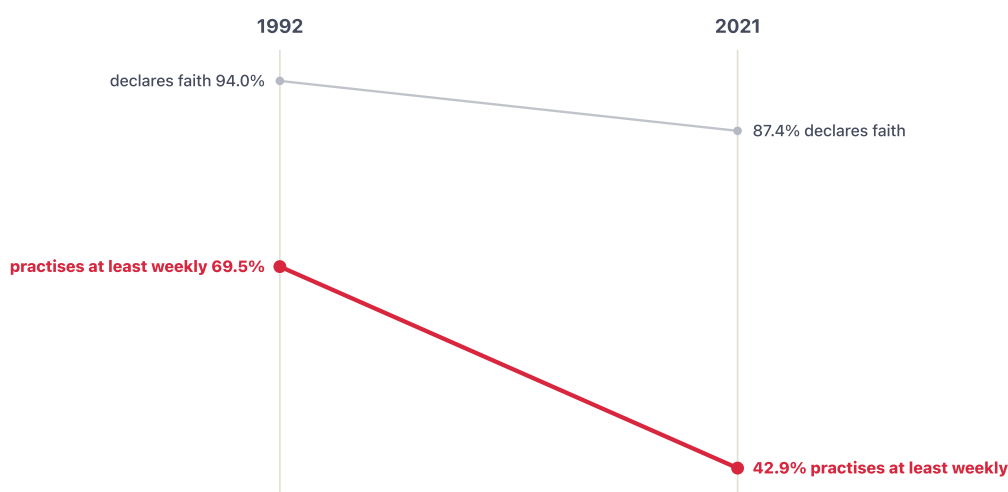
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FIG. 2.5

Faith endures, practice fades: religiosity 1992 → 2021

Share of adult Poles, %, CBOS, 1992 vs 2021



Declared faith: 94% (1992) → 87.4% (2021); regular practice (at least weekly): 69.5% → 42.9%; non-practising: 24.1%

ISKK, dominicantes 2024: 29.6% of those obliged attend Sunday mass

Poland remains one of Europe's more religious societies by declaration — 87% call themselves believers — but practice is falling faster than ever recorded, especially among the young. On one

Sunday in 2024, 29.6% of those obliged were at mass; in 1992, 70% of adults practised regularly. It is the same dividing line as at the Christmas Eve table: identity stays, the institution loses.

SOURCES

1. CBOS, Komunikat z badań nr 144/2021 „Religijność młodych na tle ogółu społeczeństwa” <https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKO_M.POL/2021/K_144_21.PDF> (2021-11)
2. Instytut Statystyki Kościoła Katolickiego — dominicantes i communicantes 2024 <<https://iskk.pl/>> (2025)

CBOS data from August 2021; ISKK counts mass attendance against those obliged (single-Sunday count methodology).

CHAPTER 3

Economy: from the periphery to the top twenty

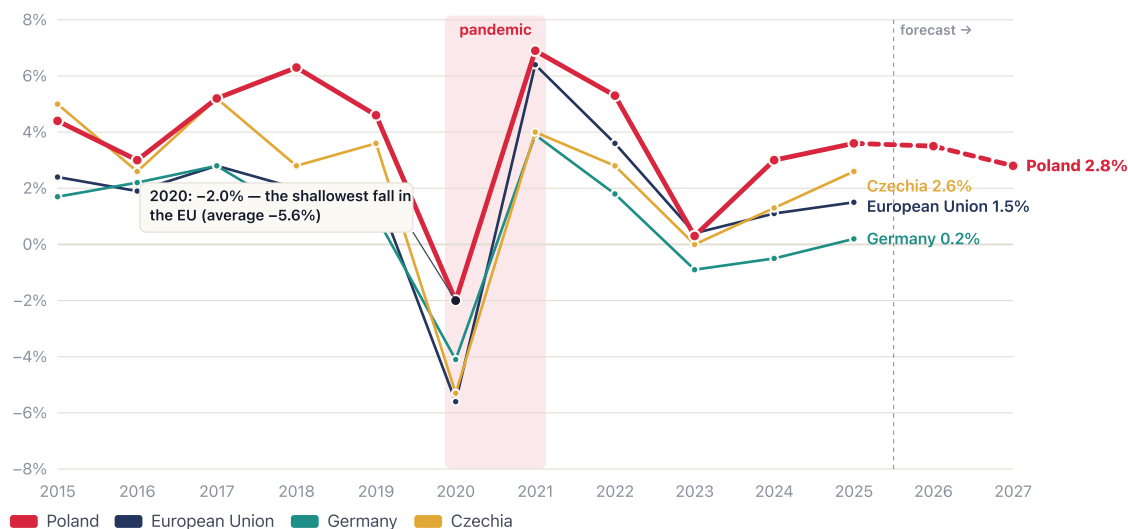
Since 1992 Poland grew without interruption for longer than any other European country. It is now the world's 21st-largest economy, a whisker from the top twenty, and the fastest-growing large economy in the EU.

This chapter collects the hard numbers on the size and speed of the Polish economy: nominal GDP passed one trillion dollars in 2025, real output is up 114% since EU accession, and income per head in purchasing-power terms has climbed from half to four-fifths of the EU average. It also shows two cracks visible in the very same databases: the second-highest deficit in the EU and an investment rate below the average.

FIG. 3.1

A resilient economy: Poland's GDP growth against the EU

Real GDP growth, % year on year, 2015–2025; Poland 2026–2027: European Commission forecast (spring 2026)



28 years of uninterrupted growth (1992–2019) — the longest run in Europe

2009: the only EU country without a recession (+2.6%); 2020: the shallowest pandemic recession in the EU (-2.0%)

2025: +3.6% against +1.5% in the EU and +0.2% in Germany

Poland's economy is neither the largest in the region nor the richest — it is the most resilient. Between 1992 and 2019 it grew without a single year of contraction, and in 2009, when the whole Union shrank by more than 4%, it was the only member state to grow. The pandemic broke that run more gently than anywhere else in the EU: -2.0% against an average of -5.6% and -10.9% in Spain.

After the inflation-driven slowdown of 2023, growth returned to 3–4% a year — two to three times the euro-area pace. Forecasts by the Commission, the central bank and the rating agencies converge on 3.5–3.7% for 2026 and about 2.8% for 2027, as the biggest investment impulse of recent years — the EU Recovery and Resilience plan — winds down.

SOURCES

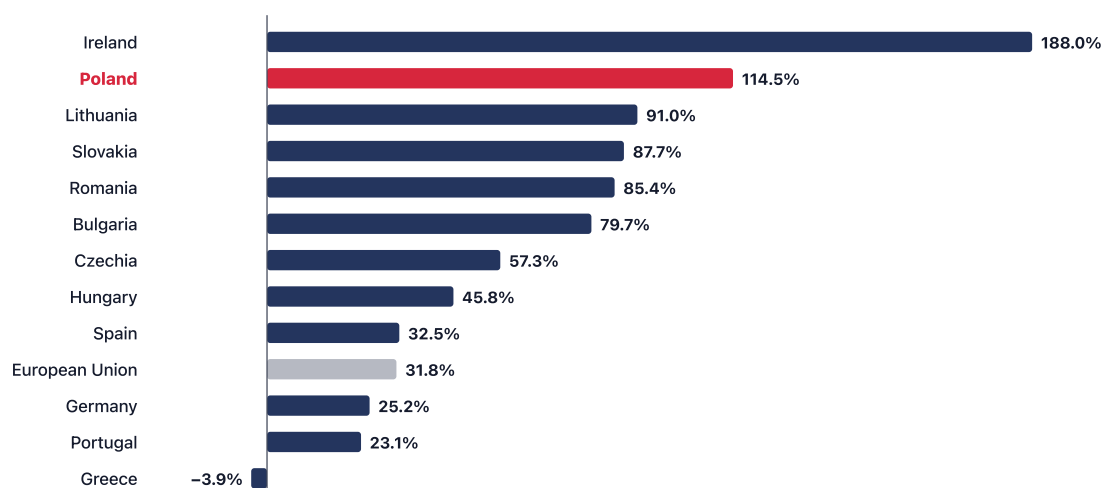
1. Bank Światowy, World Development Indicators — GDP growth (annual %), NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG <<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=PL>> (2026-08)
2. Komisja Europejska, Spring 2026 Economic Forecast — Poland <https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/economic-surveillance-eu-member-states/country-pages-including-country-reports/poland/economic-forecast-poland_en> (2026-05)
3. Eurostat, nama_10_gdp — real GDP growth 2009 (Polska jedynym krajem UE ze wzrostem) <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/nama_10_gdp/default/table?lang=en> (2026-08)

All series from one database (World Bank); the World Bank's "European Union" aggregate differs slightly from Eurostat's EU27 (2025: 1.5% vs 1.4%).

FIG. 3.2

The race since 2004: who grew the most since the EU's enlargement

Cumulative real GDP growth 2004→2025, % (2004 = 100); compounded from World Bank annual growth rates



Poland: +114.5% real GDP 2004–2025 — 3.6 times the EU average

Germany over the same period: +25.2%; Greece: –3.9%

One chart that sums up two decades. Since the Union's 2004 enlargement the Polish economy has more than doubled, while the EU as a whole grew by less than a third and Germany — the main market for Polish exports — by a quarter. Only Ireland is ahead, and Ireland's GDP is a statistical artefact of corporate accounting.

Over the same period Greece shrank, and Portugal — the country Poland caught up with in income per head in 2025 — grew by less than a quarter. Among the Union's large economies, nobody closed the gap faster.

SOURCES

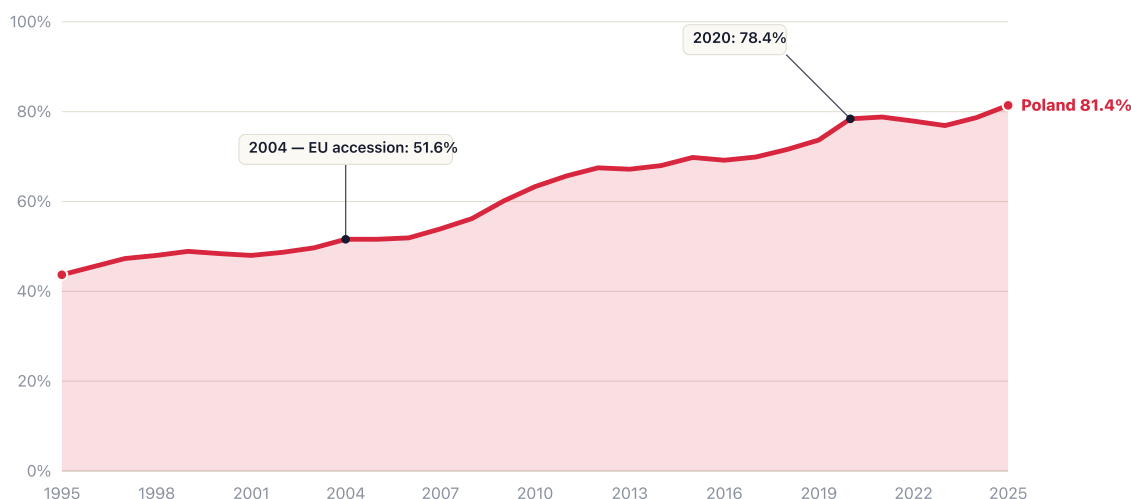
1. Bank Światowy, World Development Indicators — GDP growth (annual %), NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG; złożenie rocznych stóp 2005–2025 (obliczenie własne) <<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=PL>> (2026-08)

Ireland: distorted by the booking of multinationals' intangible assets (not a reflection of the real economy). Values are our own compounding of the World Bank series — a transparent, reproducible method.

FIG. 3.3

From one half to four-fifths: GDP per head relative to the EU average

GDP per capita in purchasing power standards (PPS), EU27 = 100, 1995–2025



1995: 43.7% of the EU average · 2004: 51.6% · 2014: 68.0% · 2025: 81.4%

2025: Poland drew level with Portugal and overtook Greece, Hungary, Slovakia and Estonia

The strongest single number of this chapter: at the moment of accession the average resident of Poland produced just over half of what the average EU resident did; in 2025 — more than four-fifths. That is 30 percentage points in one generation, with a clear acceleration after 2004 and during the pandemic years, when the rest of Europe braked harder than Poland.

Drawing level with Portugal, a member since 1986, is a symbolic reference point in the Polish debate about “catching up with the West”. The years 2001–2003 show that convergence is not automatic: before accession the indicator stood still for three years.

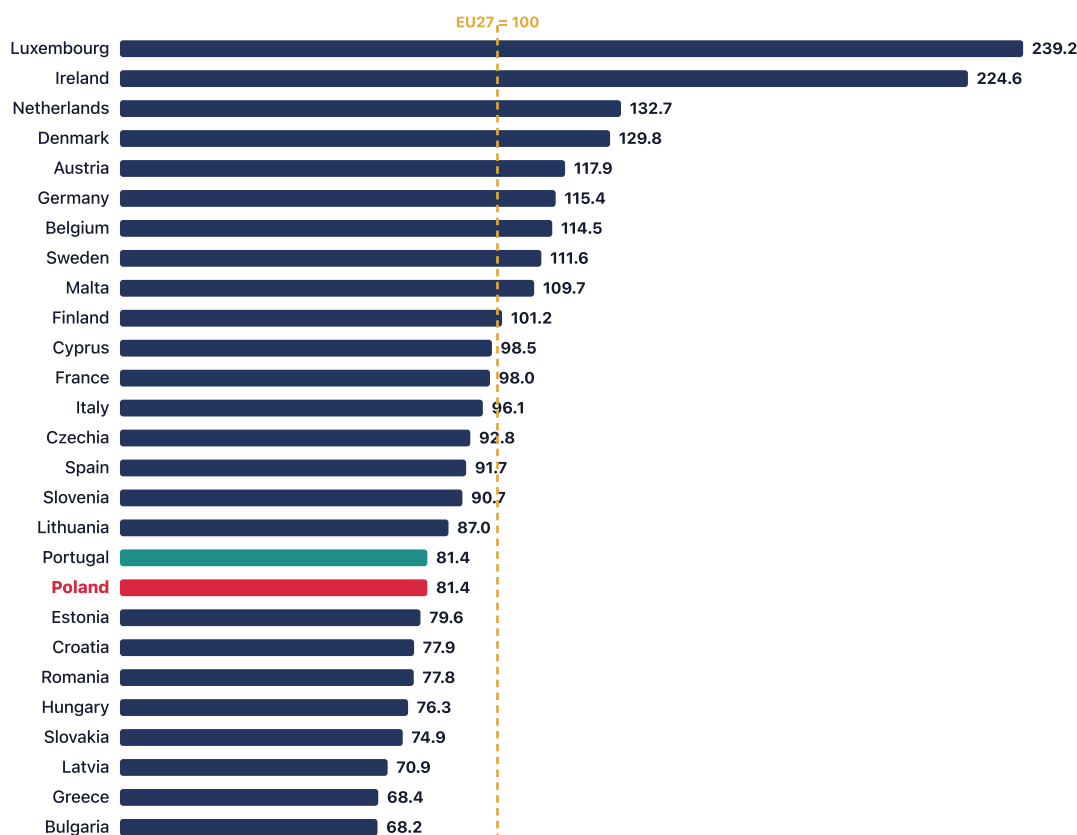
SOURCES

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FIG. 3.4

Level with Portugal: GDP per head across the EU, 2025

GDP per capita in PPS, EU27 = 100, 2025



Poland 81.4 — above Estonia, Croatia, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Latvia, Greece and Bulgaria

Czechia (92.8) and Spain (91.7) are still about 10 points away

The 2025 ranking shows where Poland stands right now: mid-table, exactly level with Portugal and ahead of every country that joined the Union with it or later — except Czechia, Slovenia and Lithuania. Back in 2004 Poland was second to last among the then 25 members, ahead only of Latvia.

The distance to the “old Union” has not vanished: Spain and Czechia are ten points away, Germany thirty-four. But the direction and the pace are unambiguous, and in the purchasing power of minimum wages and median incomes (chapter 4) convergence is even further advanced.

SOURCES

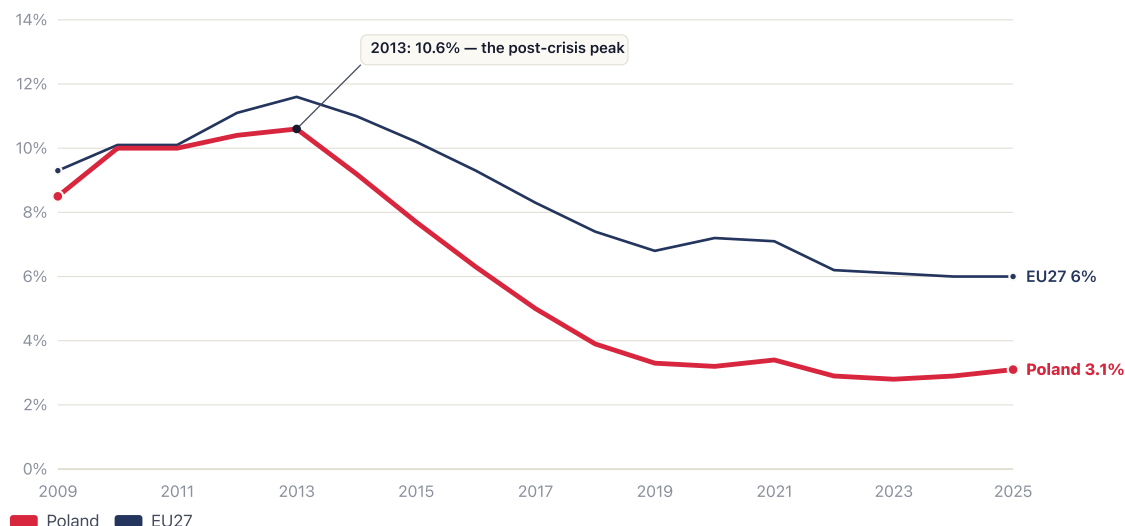
1. Eurostat, [nama_10_pc](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/nama_10_pc/default/table?lang=en) — GDP per capita in PPS, EU27_2020 = 100, 2025 <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/nama_10_pc/default/table?lang=en> (2026-08)

Luxembourg and Ireland: inflated by cross-border workers (LU) and corporate accounting (IE).

FIG. 3.5

From double-digit unemployment to one of the lowest rates in Europe

Unemployment rate (LFS, ages 15–74), % of the labour force, annual averages 2009–2025



2013: 10.6% · 2025: 3.1% — against an EU average of 6.0%

A decade ago Poland had higher unemployment than Spain has today. The lines crossed around 2014 and since then the Polish labour market has been among the tightest in the Union: for the past five years the rate has not exceeded 3.5%, and in 2023 it fell to 2.8%.

June 2026: 3.1% — third-lowest in the EU (after Bulgaria and Cyprus, 3.0% each)

Precision matters: in individual months Poland is sometimes first, but in June 2026 it was third — after Bulgaria and Cyprus. The flip side of this success is a shortage of workers, filled to a large extent by people from Ukraine and Belarus (chapter 14).

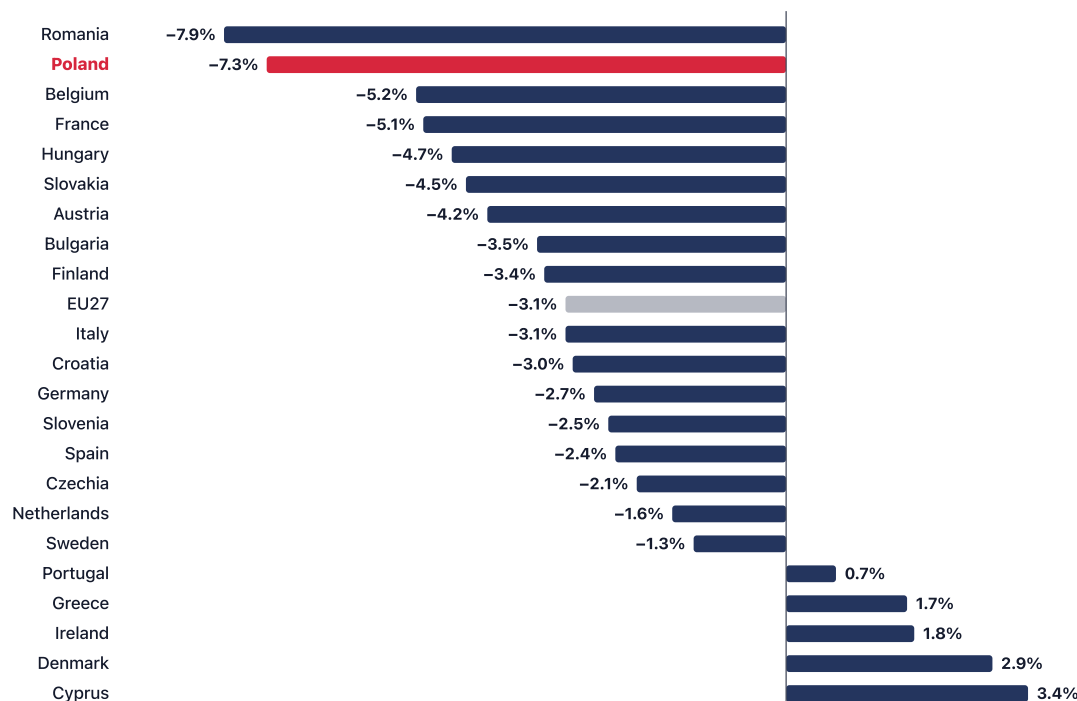
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FIG. 3.6

The dark side of the boom: the second-highest deficit in the Union

General government balance, % of GDP, 2025 (EDP notification, April 2026)



Deficit 2025: -7.3% of GDP (EU: -3.1%);
Commission forecast: -6.5% in 2026,
-6.3% in 2027

Debt: 59.7% of GDP (EU: 81.7%) — still
low, but the fastest-rising in the EU:
64.5% in 2026, 68.3% in 2027

Fitch and Moody's: negative outlook (2025), ratings A-/A2 affirmed

Record growth is to a large extent financed by a record deficit — defence spending and social transfers, part of them booked outside the budget. In 2025 only Romania had a bigger hole in its public finances; Poland's deficit was more than twice the EU average.

It is a number with two faces. Public debt (59.7% of GDP) remains 22 points below the EU average and under the Maastricht threshold, but it is rising faster than anywhere else in the Union, and three of the four rating agencies have moved their outlook to negative. No rating has been cut — a warning, not a downgrade.

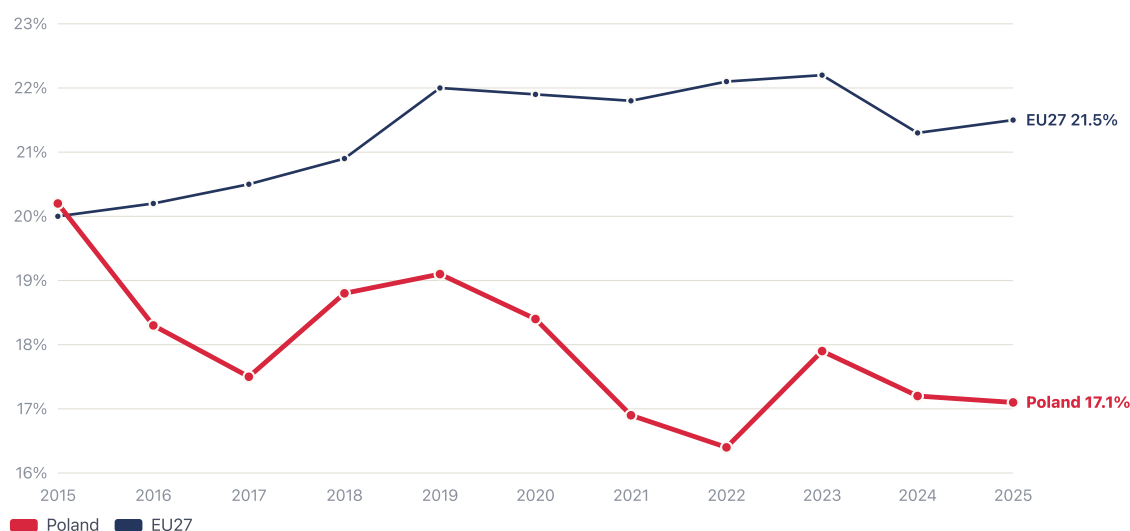
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2. Komisja Europejska, Spring 2026 Economic Forecast — Poland (prognoza deficytu i długu) <https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/economic-surveillance-eu-member-states/country-pages-including-country-reports/poland/economic-forecast-poland_en> (2026-05)
3. Ministerstwo Finansów — komunikaty o decyzjach agencji ratingowych (Fitch A–, perspektywa negatywna) <<https://www.gov.pl/web/finance/fitch-rating-agency-affirmed-polands-credit-rating11>> (2026-02)

FIG. 3.7

Growing, but investing less: the investment gap with the EU

Gross fixed capital formation, % of GDP, 2015–2025



**2015: Poland 20.2% of GDP vs EU 20.0% ·
2025: Poland 17.1% vs EU 21.5%**

**A 4.4-point gap despite the largest inflow
of EU funds in history**

**Recovery plan: EUR 54.7 bn, EUR 34.2 bn (62%) disbursed by June 2026; the facility closes
on 31 December 2026**

The second crack in the success story. In 2015 Poland invested slightly more than the average EU country; ten years later — clearly less. Growth is driven by household consumption and public spending, not private capital, and the investment rate has been persistently below the EU average since 2016.

The EU recovery plan partly masks the problem: it is the largest external investment impulse in the history of the Polish economy, and it is winding down — the last payments fall at the end of 2026. Hence the growth slowdown forecast for 2027.

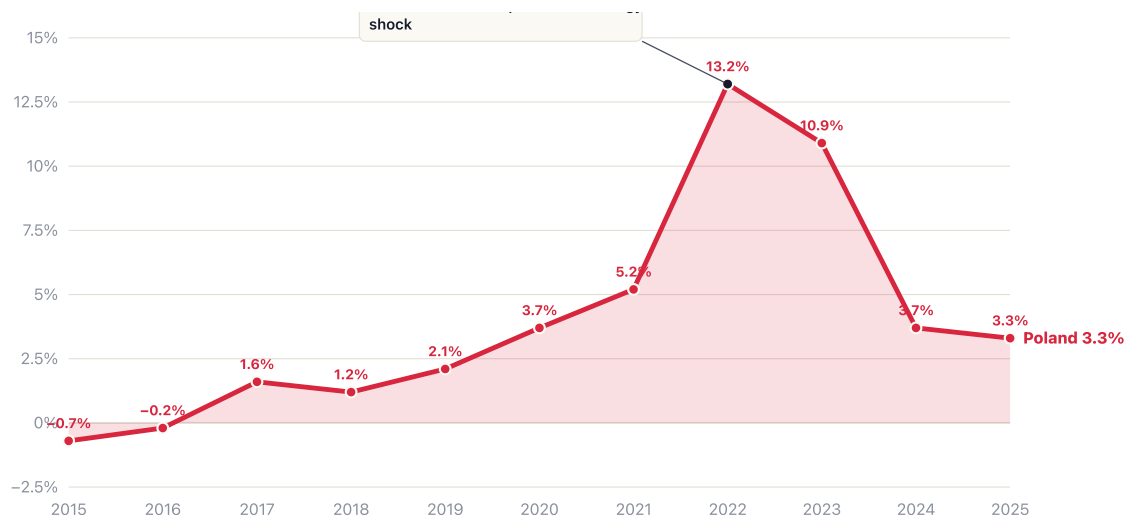
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FIG. 3.8

From deflation through the 2022 shock to the central bank's target: inflation 2015–2025

Harmonised index of consumer prices (HICP), annual average rate of change, %, 2015–2025



Peak: 13.2% in 2022 — the highest this century; 2025: 3.3%; July 2026: 3.0% (CPI)

NBP reference rate: 0.10% (2020) → 6.75% (Sept 2022) → 3.75% (since March 2026)

A sequence in three acts: the deflation of 2015–2016, the energy shock after Russia's invasion of Ukraine that pushed prices up 13% in a single year, and the return to the vicinity of the central bank's target. The National Bank of Poland raised rates by 665 basis points in eleven months —

one of the fastest normalisations in Europe — and has cut them seven times since May 2025.

For this story inflation is context, not protagonist: without this series every chart of nominal wages in chapter 4 would mislead.

SOURCES

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2. Narodowy Bank Polski — [podstawowe stopy procentowe NBP \(historia zmian\)](https://nbp.pl/en/monetary-policy/monetary-policy-instruments/basic-nbp-interest-rates/) (2026-03)

NBP inflation target: 2.5% ± 1 pp. Annual average national CPI for 2025: 3.6% (HICP: 3.3%); the July 2026 reading (3.0%) is the national CPI, not HICP.

CHAPTER 4

Wages and living standards: six years after the pandemic

Since 2019 the average wage has risen 81% in nominal terms and by more than a fifth in real terms, and the minimum wage has doubled. Poverty and income inequality have fallen to some of the lowest levels in the Union. Housing has not kept up.

The most repeated claim about Poland's wage boom is true, but needs an honest scale: a nominal +81% since 2019 is, after inflation, roughly +22% in real purchasing power — still a great deal, with one year of decline (2022) and a record rebound (2024). This chapter shows how that growth spread through society — from the minimum wage through median income to child poverty — and where money is not keeping up with prices.

FIG. 4.1

Six years after the pandemic in six numbers

What changed in people's wallets between 2019 and 2025/2026

+81%

average wage, nominal

PLN 4,918 → 8,904 (2019→2025, Statistics Poland)

+22%

average wage, real

cumulative gain in purchasing power 2020–2025 (Statistics Poland)

PLN 4,806

minimum wage 2026

PLN 2,250 in 2019 — more than double

88%

of the EU median income (in purchasing power)

64% in 2015 (Eurostat, PPS)

15.0%

at risk of poverty or social exclusion

EU: 20.9% — Poland among the best in the Union (2025)

+77%

house prices 2019→2025

EU: +34.5% — this is where money is not keeping up

**Average wage in the national economy:
PLN 4,918 (2019) → PLN 8,904 (2025)**

**Enterprise sector, July 2026: PLN 9,509
gross**

Six tiles, one story: there is significantly more money, significantly less poverty, and the only category in which Poland clearly loses against its

own growth is house prices. Each of these numbers is unpacked in the charts that follow.

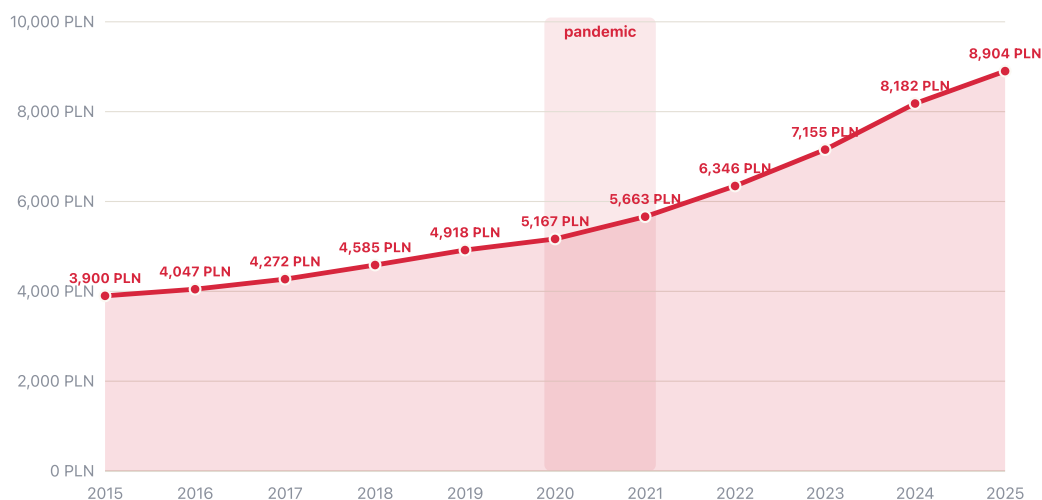
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FIG. 4.2

The average wage: from PLN 3,900 to 8,900 in a decade

Average monthly gross wage in the national economy, PLN, 2015–2025



2015: PLN 3,899.78 · 2019: PLN 4,918.17 · 2025: PLN 8,903.56 (national economy, gross)

Median (Feb 2026): PLN 7,690.82 — about 82% of the mean; in firms of up to 9 people the median equals the minimum wage

This is the number the whole wage-boom claim rests on: between 2019 and 2025 the average gross pay rose by PLN 3,985, or 81%. The curve has not a single year of decline, and from 2021 it clearly accelerates — first on the back of inflation, then in real terms.

An honest counterpoint: the mean is pulled up by top earners. The median in February 2026 was PLN 7,691, and in micro-firms half of employees earn no more than the statutory minimum. The public sector now pays more on average than the private one.

SOURCES

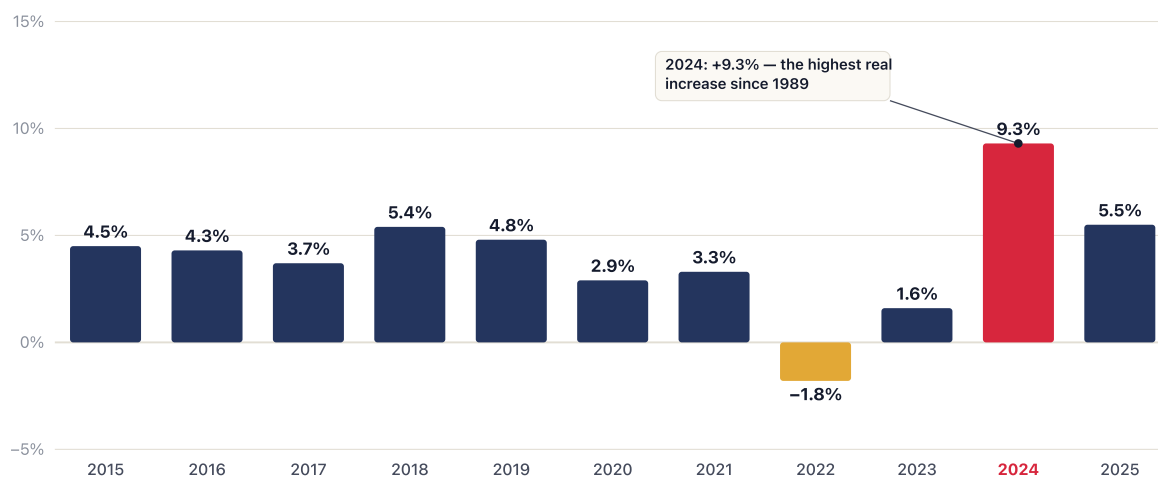
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Nominal values. The real change (after inflation) is shown in the next chart.

FIG. 4.3

What was left after inflation: real wage growth year on year

Average real gross wage in the national economy, % change on the previous year, 2015–2025



The only real decline: 2022 (–1.8%); the record: 2024 (+9.3%) — the most since 1989

Cumulative 2020–2025: about +22% in real terms against +81% nominal

A nominal +81% is not an 81% rise in prosperity. After inflation — cumulatively about 48.6% over 2020–2025 — the purchasing power of the average wage grew by roughly 22% in six years. Still a lot, but three and a half times less than the nominal figure suggests.

Two bars carry the whole narrative of the pandemic decade: 2022, when 14.4% inflation ate the pay rises, and 2024, when real wages rose 9.3% — the strongest gain since the start of the transition.

SOURCES

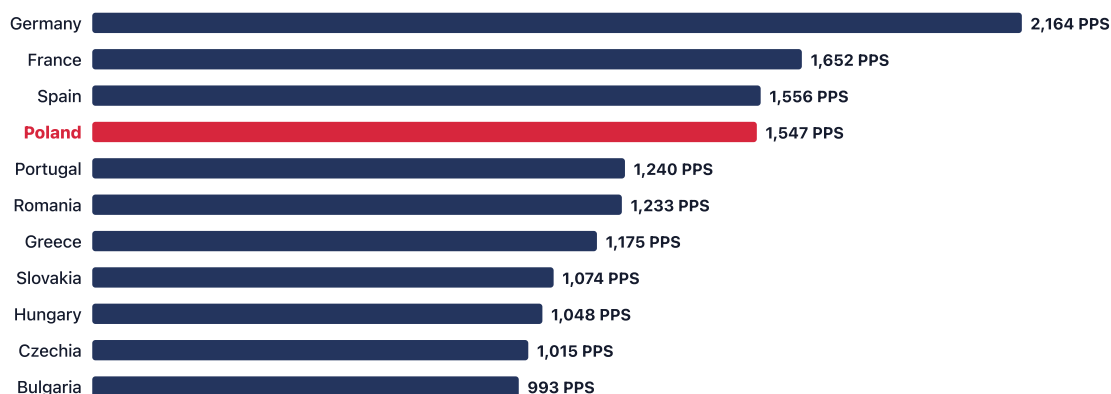
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Cumulative CPI inflation 2020–2025: about +48.6% — hence the gap between nominal and real growth.

FIG. 4.4

The minimum wage in purchasing power: level with Spain, half as much again as Czechia

Monthly minimum wage in purchasing power standards (PPS), January 2026, selected EU countries



Poland: 875 PPS (2019) → 1,547 PPS (January 2026), +77%

Nominal: PLN 2,250 (2019) → PLN 4,806 (2026), +114%; about 53% of the average wage

The strongest positive comparative number in this chapter. Poland's minimum wage has risen faster than the average wage and, in real purchasing power, has overtaken Portugal, Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania, stopping 9 PPS short of Spain.

The side effect shows up in micro-firms: the median pay in businesses of up to 9 people is exactly PLN 4,806 — the statutory minimum. For a large share of the smallest employers the minimum wage has become the de facto market wage.

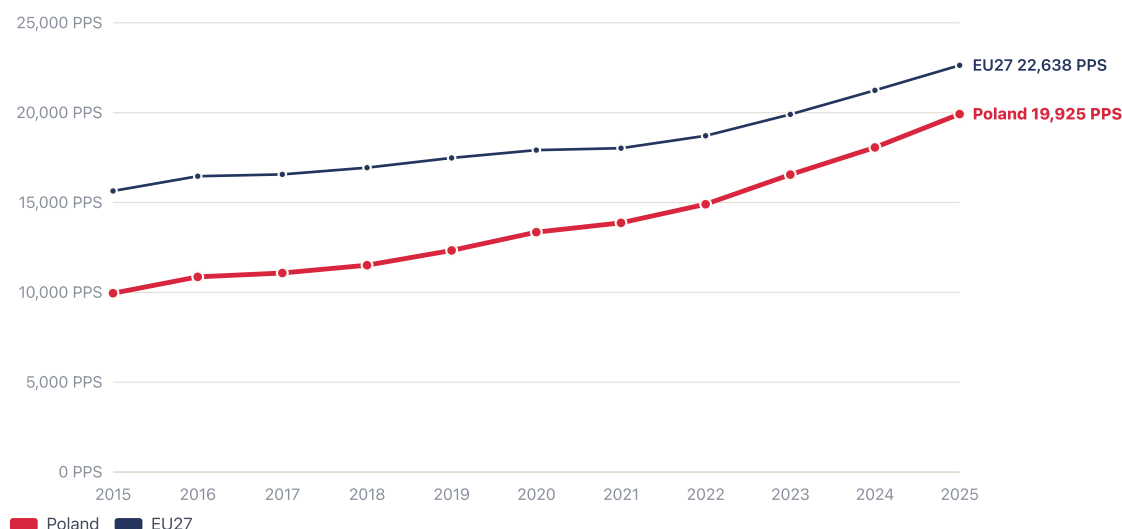
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2. Rozporządzenia Rady Ministrów w sprawie wysokości minimalnego wynagrodzenia (zestawienie kwot 2019–2026) (2026-01)

FIG. 4.5

The cleanest convergence chart: median income, Poland vs the EU

Median equivalised disposable income per person, PPS, 2015–2025 (EU-SILC; survey year, incomes for the previous year)



Poland: 9,950 PPS (2015) → 19,925 PPS (2025) — exactly double; EU: +45%

Ratio to EU27: 64% (2015) → 71% (2019) → 88% (2025)

Two lines converging over a decade. The median — the income of a “typical” household, immune to distortion by the richest — doubled in purchasing power in Poland while growing by less than half across the Union. The shrinking space between the lines is the simplest picture of catching up with the West in wallets, not only in GDP.

A caveat that must not be skipped: actual individual consumption per head (AIC, EU = 100) has been flat since 2020 at 84–86, and Romania and Lithuania have already overtaken Poland. Incomes are rising faster than consumption — Poles are saving more and paying off more expensive homes.

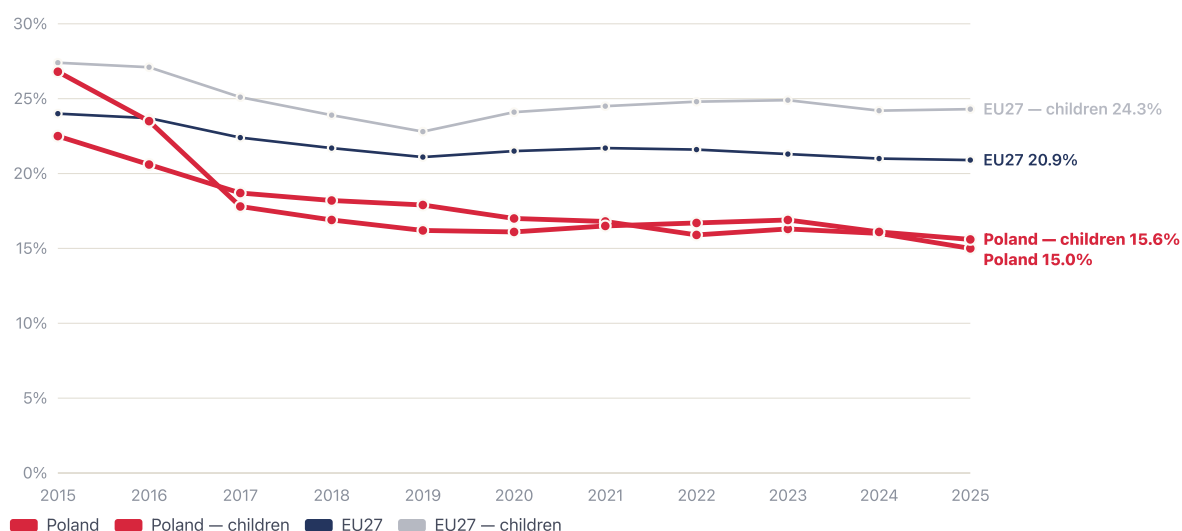
SOURCES

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FIG. 4.6

Poverty has fallen to one of the lowest levels in the Union

Share of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE), %, 2015–2025



AROPE overall: 22.5% (2015) → 15.0% (2025); EU: 24.0% → 20.9%

Children: 26.8% → 15.6%; the drop between 2016 and 2017 coincides with the first full year of the 500+ child benefit

Severe material deprivation: 7.8% → 2.0% (EU: 6.3%)

Poland moved from close to the EU average (2015) to one of the four lowest at-risk-of-poverty rates in the EU (2025) — alongside Czechia, the Netherlands and Slovenia — while the EU average has barely moved. The drop in child poverty between 2016 and 2017 coincides with the first full year of the 500+ child benefit; a

temporal correlation, not proof of causation, but the most-cited effect of that policy.

Severe material deprivation — “I cannot afford heating, a week's holiday, replacing furniture” — fell from 7.8% to 2.0%, more than three times below the EU average. It is the sharpest improvement of its kind in the whole Union.

SOURCES

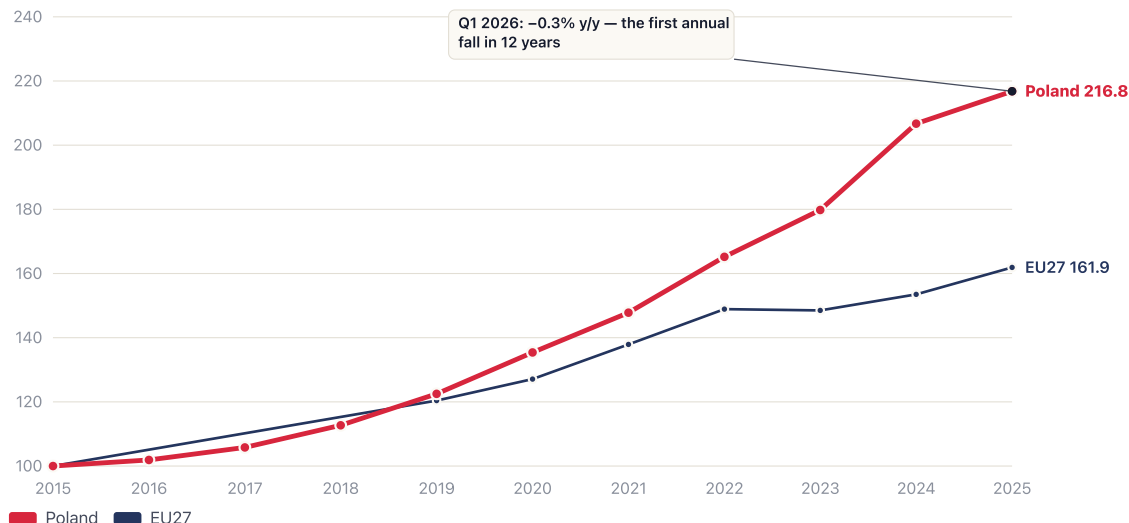
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Series recalculated under the AROPE definition in force since 2021, so the 2015 values differ from those published at the time.

FIG. 4.7

Where money is not keeping up: house prices rose twice as fast as in the EU

House price index (HPI), 2015 = 100, Poland vs EU27, 2015–2025



House price index 2015 = 100: Poland 216.8 (2025) vs EU 161.9; 2019→2025: +77% vs +34.5%

New flat, primary market, 7 largest cities, Q1 2026: PLN 14,241/m² (NBP)

An average gross monthly wage in the enterprise sector buys about 0.69 m² of a new flat in Warsaw, about 0.81 m² on average across 7 cities (Q1 2026) — the ratio is edging up for the first time in years

The hardest dark side of the living-standards chapter. House prices in Poland have risen more than twice as fast as the EU average since 2015 and faster than wages: a gross monthly salary buys about 0.7 m² of a new flat in Warsaw, so a 50 m² home costs about six years of an entire salary.

Two signs of change: in Q1 2026 the primary market recorded its first annual price fall in 12 years (–0.3%), and the affordability ratio ticked up for the first time in years. On the other hand, 30.9% of Poles still live in overcrowded homes — almost twice as often as the average EU resident (chapter 14).

SOURCES

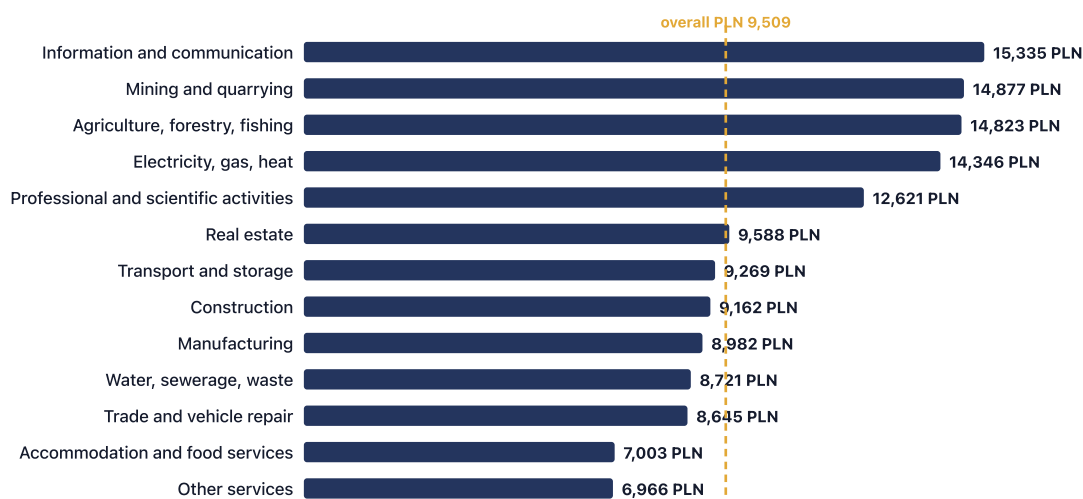
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3. Eurostat, ilc_lvho05a — overcrowding rate <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_lvho05a/default/table?lang=en> (2026-08)

NBP affordability = square metres of a new flat per average enterprise-sector wage; values read off the report's chart (approximate).

FIG. 4.8

Who earns what: wages by sector, July 2026

Average monthly gross wage in the enterprise sector by NACE section, PLN, July 2026



IT and communication: PLN 15,335 — 2.2 times hospitality (PLN 7,003)

Enterprise sector overall: PLN 9,509 gross, +6.8% y/y

The spread between sectors is twofold and persistent: IT, mining and energy pay over PLN 14,000 on average; trade, hospitality and personal services PLN 7,000–9,000. Wages are currently rising fastest in professional and

scientific services (+7.7% y/y) and IT (+7.2%), slowest in other services (+1.0%).

Agriculture's high position is a statistical artefact — the enterprise sector covers only large farms and firms (10+ employees), not family holdings.

SOURCES

1. GUS — Przeciętne zatrudnienie i wynagrodzenie w sektorze przedsiębiorstw w lipcu 2026 r., tablica 2 <<https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/rynek-pracy/pracujacy-zatrudnieni-wynagrodzenia-koszty-pracy/przecietne-zatrudnienie-i-wynagrodzenie-w-sektorze-przedsiębiorstw-w-lipcu-2026-r-3,176.html>> (2026-08)

CHAPTER 5

Business, exports and digital Poland

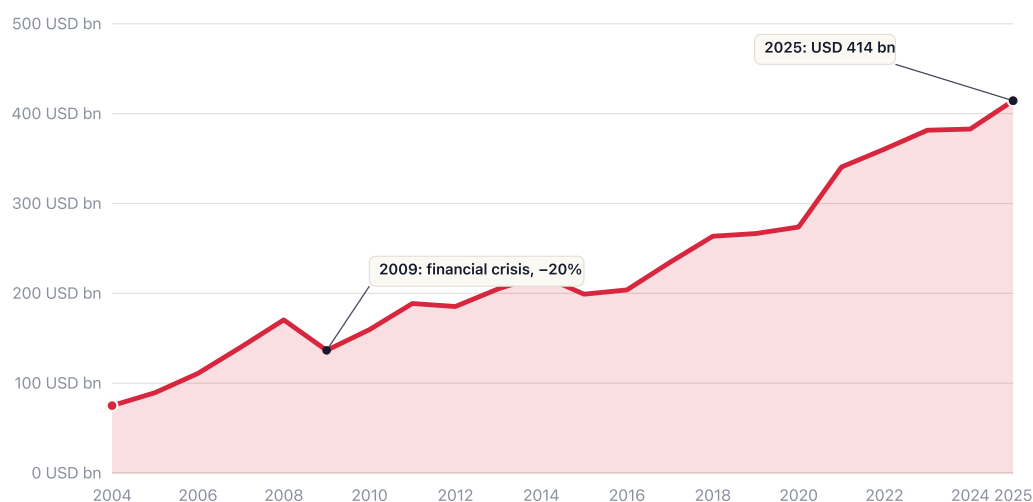
Goods exports have grown sixfold since EU accession. Poland leads a dozen niches — from dishwashers to windows, poultry and apple concentrate — and its fastest-growing export is intangible: IT services and games.

Poland's economy is export-led and industrial: more than a third of foreign sales are machinery and transport equipment, and one in four exported goods goes to Germany. But alongside that sits a surprisingly long list of categories in which Poland is number one in Europe or the world — and a growing export of skills: IT services, whose foreign sales grew tenfold in fourteen years. The dark side here is single and concrete: R&D spending still a third below the EU average.

FIG. 5.1

The export engine: sixfold growth in two decades

Goods exports from Poland, USD bn, current prices, 2004–2025



2004: USD 75 bn · 2025: USD 414 bn (EUR 369 bn, final Statistics Poland data) — one slump (2009), one dip in EUR (2024)

Poland's share of world exports: 0.57% and 32nd place (2001) → 1.52% and 22nd place (2023)

Destinations 2025: Germany 26.9%, Czechia 6.2%, France 6.1%; about 75% to the EU single market

Two decades of almost uninterrupted growth with one deep slump in 2009 and a flat 2024. The value of foreign sales grew sixfold and Poland's share of world exports from 0.57% to 1.52%, moving it from 32nd to 22nd among exporters.

The structure is stable and is both an asset and a risk: more than a third is machinery and transport equipment, and a quarter of the total goes to one country. Weakness in German industry feeds straight through to Polish suppliers — hence the falling share of exports in GDP since 2022 (from 62% to 50%).

SOURCES

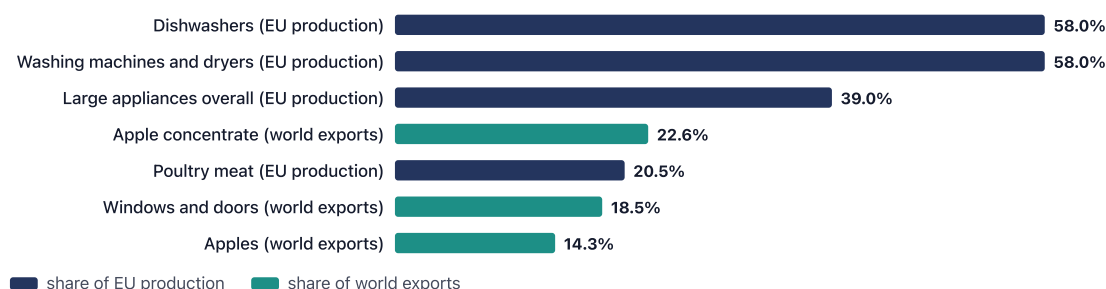
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USD series (World Bank) with the last point from Statistics Poland (final data); growth depends on the currency: in 2025 exports rose 2.6% in PLN, 4.4% in EUR and 8.2% in USD.

FIG. 5.2

Where Poland comes first: export and production niches

Poland's share of EU production or of world exports in selected categories, %, 2024



39% of the EU's large domestic appliances are made in Poland (by volume); dishwashers — 58%, washing machines and dryers — 58%, ovens — 34%

Windows and doors: 18.5% of world exports, 1st in the EU continuously since 2015, 2nd in the world after China

Poultry: 20.5% of EU production (1st); apple concentrate: 22.6% of world exports (1st in the world)

A textbook example of Poland's role in the European value chain: a very high share of production with low brand recognition. Nearly six in ten dishwashers and washing machines in the Union are assembled in Polish plants of BSH, Electrolux, Beko or Samsung; one in five European chickens and one in five windows in the world come from Poland.

The list is longer than the chart: third furniture exporter in Europe, the world's second producer of small motor yachts, fifth cosmetics exporter in the EU, 58% of the European hydrogen-bus market (Solaris). The niches are real but also fragile — lithium-ion battery exports, the hit of 2023 (EUR 10.9 bn, 2nd in the world), lost more than half their value in 2024 as demand for electric cars in Germany fell.

SOURCES

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4. [trade.gov.pl \(PAIH\) — Polska branża meblarska w 2024 r. \(3. eksporter mebli w Europie, 6. na świecie, 16,2 mld EUR\)](https://www.trade.gov.pl/en/news/the-polish-furniture-industry-in-2024-export-challenges-and-new-perspectives/) <<https://www.trade.gov.pl/en/news/the-polish-furniture-industry-in-2024-export-challenges-and-new-perspectives/>> (2025)

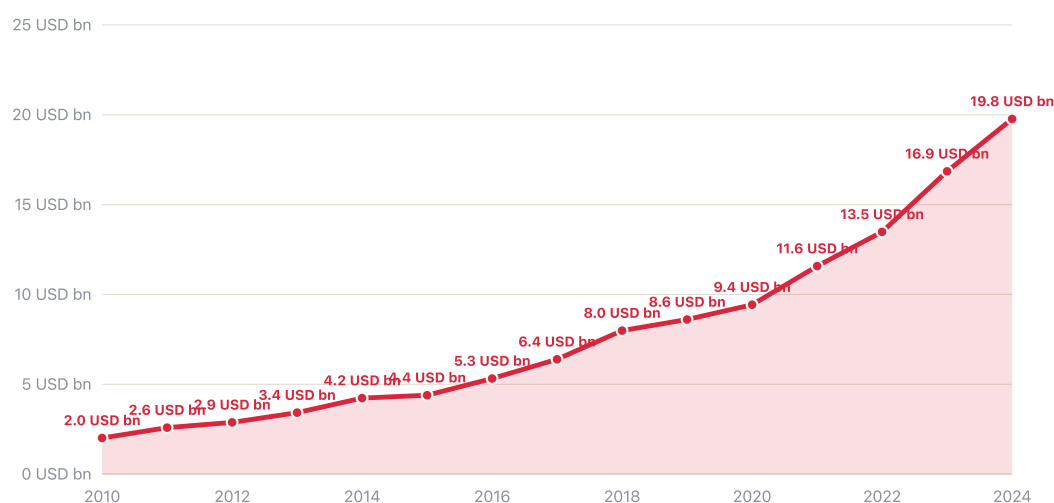
Compiled from several sources with different reference years (2024–2025). The world-export shares for apple concentrate and apples come from PAIH/KOWR publications and need confirmation against

FAO/Comtrade data before print. Off the chart: furniture — 3rd exporter in Europe, 6th in the world; motor yachts up to 9 m — 2nd in the world; cosmetics — 5th exporter in the EU.

FIG. 5.3

Exporting skills: ICT services growing without a single down year

Exports of ICT services (telecoms, computer and information services), balance of payments, USD bn, 2010–2024



2010: USD 2.0 bn → 2024: USD 19.8 bn — almost tenfold, with no dip in 2020

All business-services exports (IT, BPO, SSC): a record USD 58.3 bn in 2025, +11% y/y

The smoothest growth curve in the whole material: fifteen years without a single decline, including pandemic 2020. IT-services exports are the part of the Polish economy that depends neither on the German business cycle nor on energy prices — it sells skills, not production capacity.

Set against the battery-export curve (peak and collapse within two years) it shows the difference between two strategies: a foreign corporation's factory can vanish from the trade balance in one season; a hundred thousand programmers cannot.

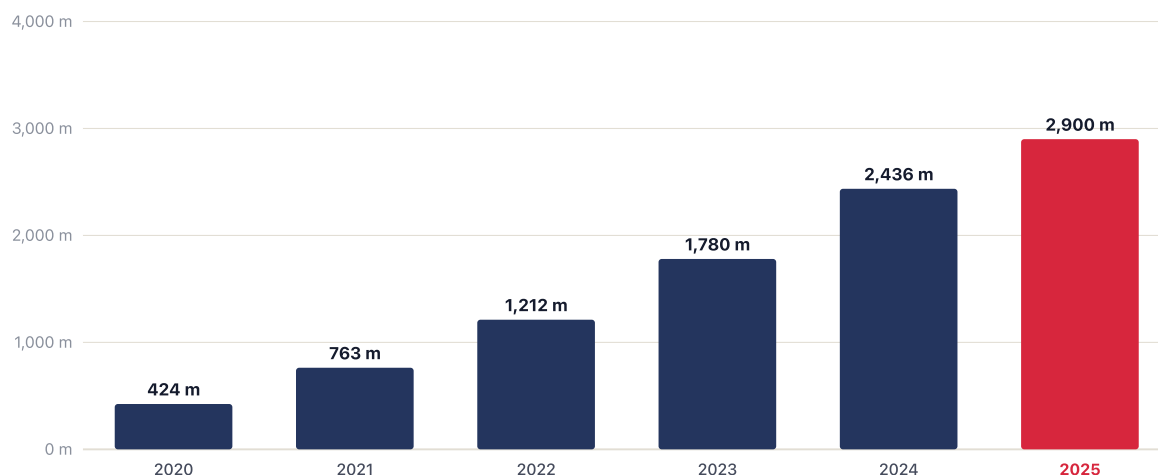
SOURCES

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FIG. 5.4

BLIK: 2.9 billion transactions a year — Poland's own payment standard

Number of BLIK transactions, millions, 2020–2025



2020: 424 m transactions → 2025: 2.9 bn (PLN 441.5 bn); 20.7 m active users

On average 8 m transactions a day, about 92 per second; over 10 bn operations since launch

97.8% of card payments in Poland are contactless (NBP, H1 2025)

A six-year exponential series and one of the strongest arguments for Poland's digital maturity. BLIK — a mobile payment system with a six-digit code, built by a consortium of banks — now handles more e-commerce operations than cards, and phone-number transfers have

replaced cash in everyday settlements between people.

The darker side of digital Poland lies elsewhere: only 50.4% of Poles aged 16–74 have at least basic digital skills, against 60.4% in the EU. Excellent infrastructure does not automatically translate into citizens' competences.

SOURCES

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BLIK is a national standard built by a consortium of Polish banks, not a product of a global card operator.

FIG. 5.5

Games as an export: The Witcher has sold 85 million copies

Cumulative sales of CD PROJEKT games, million copies, as of end-2025



The Witcher trilogy: 85 m copies; Cyberpunk 2077: 35 m; Phantom Liberty expansion: 10 m (end of 2025)

The industry: 824 studios, 14,600 employees, PLN 5.52 bn revenue (2024), about 97% from foreign sales

Revenue 2019–2024: 2.73 → 5.93 → 5.44 → 6.48 → 5.99 → 5.52 bn PLN — three years of decline after the 2022 peak

Video games are today Poland's most recognisable cultural export — The Witcher is a literary, gaming and TV brand, and Cyberpunk 2077, after its disastrous 2020 launch, reached 35 million copies faster than The Witcher 3. Poland's games industry is the second or third largest in Europe by employment (after the UK, level with France).

Honestly: after the pandemic peak the sector shrank three years in a row, and one in four studios from the 2023 report disappeared within two years. CD PROJEKT, for its part, had the second-best year in its history in 2025 by profit (PLN 595 m) and is investing in The Witcher 4 and Cyberpunk 2.

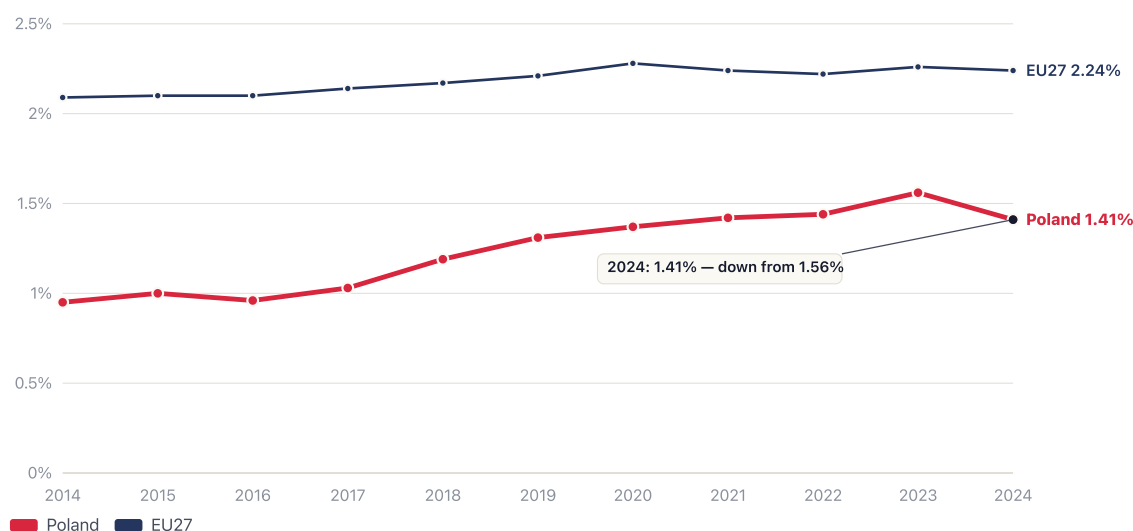
SOURCES

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FIG. 5.6

The gap that will not close: research and development spending

Gross domestic expenditure on R&D (GERD), % of GDP, Poland vs EU27, 2014–2024



Poland: 0.95% of GDP (2014) → 1.56% (2023) → 1.41% (2024); EU: 2.09% → 2.24%

2024: the first decline after a decade of growth — PLN 51.5 bn, –3.1% y/y; EU target: 3% of GDP

Global Innovation Index 2025: 39th of 139; European Innovation Scoreboard: 23rd in the EU

The central chart of this chapter's dark side. For a decade Poland closed the gap faster than most of the Union (+0.46 pp, the fourth-largest increase in the EU), but in 2024 spending fell — in nominal terms too — setting the country back two years. The gap to the EU average is now 0.8 pp, and to the EU target more than half.

In innovation rankings Poland has stood still for six years (38th–41st in the Global Innovation Index), although it gets better outputs than its inputs would suggest. The weakest links are not firms but institutions and financing: patents, venture capital, publications among the most-cited.

SOURCES

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2. GUS — Działalność badawcza i rozwojowa w Polsce w 2024 r. <<https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/nauka-i-technika-społeczeństwo-informacyjne/nauka-i-technika/działalność-badawcza-i-rozwojowa-w-polsce-w-2024-r-8,14.html>> (2025-11)
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FIG. 5.7

Digital Poland in six numbers

Digital infrastructure versus citizens' competences

2.9 bn

BLIK transactions in 2025
PLN 441.5 bn; 20.7 m users

97.8%

of card payments contactless
H1 2025; 100% of terminals support NFC (NBP)

11 m

mObywatel app users
end-2025; 1.5 m logins a day

USD 19.8 bn

ICT services exports in 2024
10× more than in 2010

2.77 m TEU

Baltic Hub Gdańsk, 2025
+23% y/y; the largest container terminal on the Baltic

50.4%

with basic digital skills
EU: 60.4% (2025); 80% target for 2030 — this is the gap

mObywatel: 11 m users (end-2025), 12 m by mid-2026; the mobile ID carries the legal force of an identity card

WIG +47% in 2025 — the Warsaw Stock Exchange's best year this century; 55 listings, over PLN 20 bn raised

Five tiles are about infrastructure, the sixth about people. Poland has one of the densest cashless-payment systems in the world, a digital identity on the phone with the force of a document, and

growing skills exports; at the same time half of adults lack basic digital skills, and the gap to the EU average (10 pp) is not shrinking despite rapid improvement.

SOURCES

1. BLIK / Polski Standard Płatności — podsumowanie 2025 <<https://www.blik.com/blisko-3-mld-transakcji-blikiem-w-2025-r-i-ponad-2-mln-nowych-uzytkownikow>> (2026-01)
2. Ministerstwo Cyfryzacji — 11 milionów mObywateli i rekordowy rok w aplikacji mObywatel <<https://www.gov.pl/web/cyfryzacja/11-milionow-mobywateli-i-rekordowy-rok-w-aplikacji-mobywatel-cyfrowa-rewolucja-w-liczbach>> (2026-01)
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4. Bank Światowy, WDI — ICT service exports, BX.GSR.CCIS.CD <<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.GSR.CCIS.CD?locations=PL>> (2026-08)
5. Miasto Gdańsk / Baltic Hub — rekord przeładunków 2025 <<https://www.gdansk.pl/wiadomosci/Rekord-za-rekordem-w-Baltic-Hub-w-2025-r,a,303916>> (2026-01)
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CHAPTER 6

Science and discovery: from Copernicus to orbit

Polonium was named after a country that was not on the map. The Czochralski method underlies every integrated circuit, and Enigma was broken in Warsaw. Polish schools now teach better than the OECD average — turning talent into patents is where the country lags.

Poland's contribution to world science is disproportionate to the country's size and political history: from heliocentrism through the kerosene lamp, vitamins and silicon monocrystals to the first extrasolar planets. Today's primary and secondary education is among the best in Europe, and Polish pupils return from almost every informatics olympiad with a medal. There is one crack, but a clear one: a country with the second-best maths score in the EU has no university in the world's top 200, and its research spending is a third below the EU average.

FIG. 6.1

Polish breakthroughs that changed the world

Discoveries and inventions of Polish scientists of world significance, 1543–2025

- 1543** ● **Nicolaus Copernicus — De revolutionibus orbium coelestium**
The heliocentric model: the Earth orbits the Sun. The start of the scientific revolution.
- 1647** ● **Johannes Hevelius — Selenographia**
The first atlas of the Moon; his Gdańsk observatory was then among the best in Europe.
- 1853** ● **Ignacy Łukasiewicz — the kerosene lamp**
On 31 July 1853 the first kerosene lamps light a hospital in Lviv; in 1854 the world's first oil mine opens at Bóbrka.
- 1898** ● **Maria Skłodowska-Curie — polonium and radium**
Polonium named after a Poland that was then absent from the map. Nobel prizes in physics (1903) and chemistry (1911).
- 1912** ● **Kazimierz Funk — vitamins**
Coins the term "vitamin" and the vitamin hypothesis.
- 1916** ● **Jan Czochralski — the crystal-growth method**
Discovered by accident, published in 1918; today the basis of silicon production for integrated circuits.
- 1932** ● **Rejewski, Różycki, Zygański — breaking Enigma**
The Cipher Bureau reconstructs the machine without ever seeing one; in July 1939 it hands the results to France and Britain.
- 1946** ● **Stanisław Ulam — the Monte Carlo method**
Co-creator of stochastic simulation and of the thermonuclear bomb design (Teller–Ulam).
- 1950** ● **Hilary Koprowski — the oral polio vaccine**
The first effective oral vaccine, tested from 1950.
- 1992** ● **Aleksander Wolszczan — the first extrasolar planets**
Planets around the pulsar PSR B1257+12 — the first confirmed exoplanets.
- 2014** ● **Olga Malinkiewicz — printed perovskite solar cells**
Inkjet-printing method for solar cells; Saule Technologies and the first production line in Wrocław (2021).
- 2025** ● **Sławosz Uznański-Wiśniewski — the Ignis mission (Ax-4)**
The second Pole in space after 47 years; 20 days on the ISS, 13 Polish experiments.

1543–2025: twelve points on the timeline, from heliocentrism to the Ignis mission

The Czochralski method (1916) is today the basis for producing silicon monocrystals for semiconductor electronics

Twelve points that share one feature: each is now part of everyday life outside Poland. The silicon in every processor is grown by the Czochralski method; the kerosene lamp started the oil industry; Funk gave us the word "vitamin". Three mathematicians from the Cipher Bureau gave the Allies the key to Enigma seven years before Bletchley Park.

The timeline ends in orbit: in June 2025 Sławosz Uznański-Wiśniewski became the second Pole in space — after Mirosław Hermaszewski in 1978 — and Poland's ESA subscription for 2026–2028 rose by 277%, the largest percentage increase among the Agency's European members.

SOURCES

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- ESA — Ignis: first Polish space mission with ESA's Sławosz Uznański-Wiśniewski <https://www.esa.int/Science_Exploration/Human_and_Robotic_Exploration/ignis/Ignis_First_space_mission_for_ESA_s_Slawosz_Uznanski-Wisniewski_begins> (2025–

06)

3. [Wikipedia — Jan Czochralski \(metoda Czochralskiego, 1916/1918\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jan_Czochralski) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jan_Czochralski> (2026)
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Dates from sources of varying rank — from an IEEE Milestone to Wikipedia. The unverifiable claim that breaking Enigma “shortened the war by 2–3 years” is deliberately omitted.

FIG. 6.2

Nobel prizes: from Skłodowska-Curie to Tokarczuk

Nobel laureates born and educated in Poland or writing in Polish

- 1903** ● **Maria Skłodowska-Curie — physics**
With Pierre Curie and Henri Becquerel, for research on radioactivity.
- 1905** ● **Henryk Sienkiewicz — literature**
"Because of his outstanding merits as an epic writer".
- 1911** ● **Maria Skłodowska-Curie — chemistry**
For the discovery of radium and polonium; the first person with two Nobel prizes.
- 1924** ● **Władysław Reymont — literature**
For "The Peasants".
- 1980** ● **Czesław Miłosz — literature**
- 1983** ● **Lech Wałęsa — Nobel Peace Prize**
Leader of Solidarity.
- 1995** ● **Józef Rotblat — Nobel Peace Prize**
Warsaw-born physicist; co-founder of the Pugwash movement.
- 1996** ● **Wisława Szymborska — literature**
- 2007** ● **Leonid Hurwicz — economics**
Born in Moscow, educated in Warsaw; mechanism design theory.
- 2018** ● **Olga Tokarczuk — literature**
The 2018 prize, announced and awarded in 2019.

Maria Skłodowska-Curie: the only person with Nobel prizes in two different natural sciences (physics 1903, chemistry 1911)

Five laureates writing in Polish: Sienkiewicz, Reymont, Miłosz, Szymborska, Tokarczuk

About 18 laureates (19 prizes) connected with Poland in total — depending on the criterion of "Polishness"

The strongest single narrative hook of the whole chapter is Maria Skłodowska-Curie: the first woman with a Nobel prize, the only person awarded in two different natural sciences, and she named the element she discovered after a homeland then absent from the map of Europe.

Polish literature has five laureates — as many as Spain, and more than Russia or Japan — from the epic Sienkiewicz to Olga Tokarczuk. Lech Wałęsa's Peace Prize (1983) honoured the whole Solidarity movement and preceded the system's collapse by six years.

SOURCES

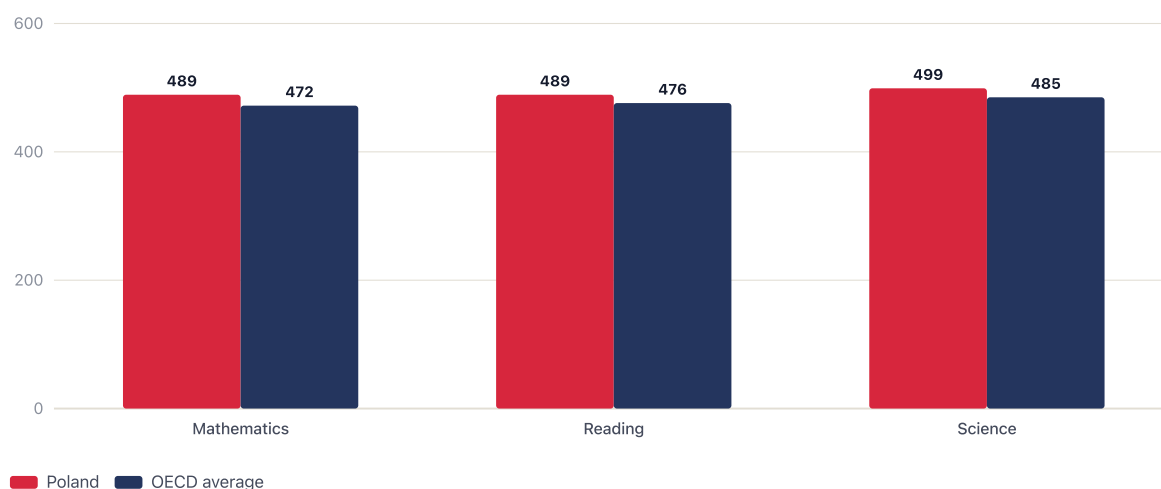
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2. [Indiana University Libraries — Polish Nobel Laureates in Literature](https://guides.libraries.indiana.edu/c.php?g=442404&p=3016377) <<https://guides.libraries.indiana.edu/c.php?g=442404&p=3016377>> (2026)

The criterion of “Polishness” is contested: a separate group are laureates born on Polish lands and awarded as citizens of other states (incl. Michelson 1907, Rabi 1944, Reichstein 1950, Schally 1977, Singer 1978, Begin 1978, Hoffmann 1981, Chrapak 1992, Peres 1994). The timeline shows only laureates with an undisputed link.

FIG. 6.3

Polish schools above the OECD average in all three domains

Mean PISA 2022 scores, points, Poland vs OECD average



PISA 2022: mathematics 489 (2nd in the EU, after Estonia), reading 489, science 499 (3rd in the EU)

77% of pupils reach the baseline level in maths (OECD: 69%); top performers (levels 5–6): 9% — exactly the OECD average

Early school leaving: 4.1% (one of the lowest in the EU); tertiary attainment at 25–34: 45.7% (EU: 43.9%, 2024)

Polish schools are clearly better than the OECD average at “lifting the bottom”: fewer pupils below the baseline, very few dropping out of the system before 18. They are not a genius factory — the share of top performers in maths is exactly the OECD average (compare Singapore: 41%).

Honest context: the 2022 results are among the lowest in Poland's PISA history (the peak came in 2012: 518 points in maths) and gave back part of the progress — a pandemic effect visible across the OECD. The second weakness is adult learning: 20% of Poles aged 25–64 against 40% in the EU — the system educates children superbly and almost stops working after twenty.

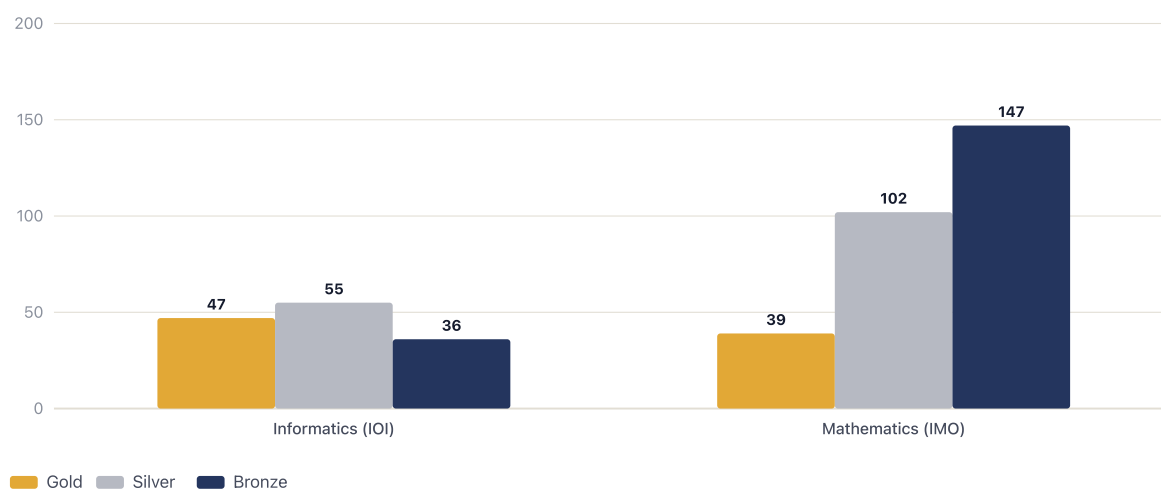
SOURCES

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2. **Komisja Europejska — Education and Training Monitor 2025: Poland** <<https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eac/education-and-training-monitor/en/country-reports/poland.html>> (2025-11)

FIG. 6.4

In the world's olympiad elite: medals of Polish pupils

Poland's medals at international subject olympiads, cumulative to 2026



International Olympiad in Informatics (IOI, since 1989): 47 gold, 55 silver, 36 bronze — 138 medals from 114 contestants

International Mathematical Olympiad (IMO): 39 gold, 102 silver, 147 bronze — 16th in the all-time table

University of Warsaw: two-time world champion in team programming, ICPC (2003, 2007)

Statistically almost every Polish contestant at the International Olympiad in Informatics comes home with a medal — 138 medals from 114 contestants since 1989. It is the strongest proof of the quality of Polish computing education and one explanation of why Polish programmers are so valued worldwide.

In mathematics the record is more modest next to China, the USA or Hungary, but steady since 1959. At university level, the University of Warsaw is one of the few institutions outside the USA, China and Russia with two ICPC world titles.

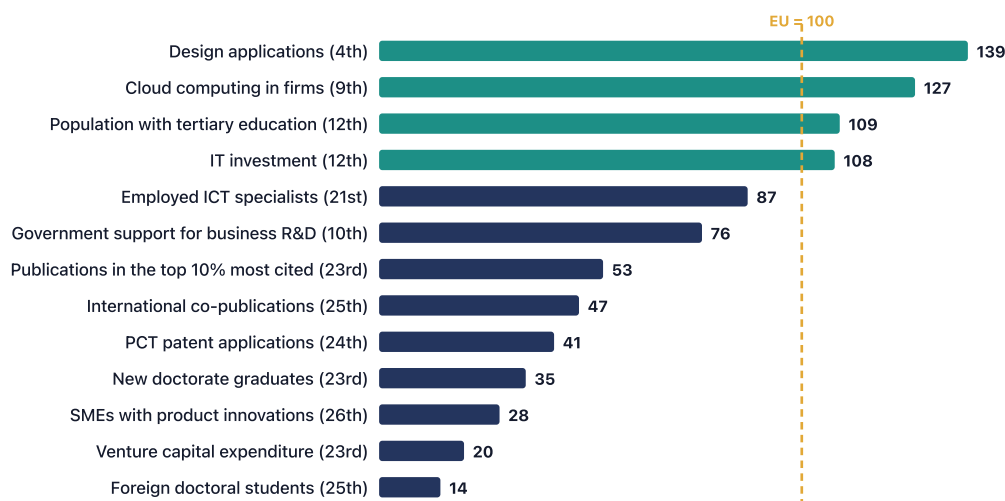
SOURCES

1. IOI Official Statistics — Poland <<https://stats.ioinformatics.org/countries/POL>> (2026-08)
2. Wikipedia — List of countries by medal count at International Mathematical Olympiad (dane imo-official.org) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_medal_count_at_International_Mathematical_Olympiad> (2026-07)
3. ICPC — The 2007 World Champions: Warsaw University <<https://icpc.global/community/history-icpc-2007>> (2007)

FIG. 6.5

Educated but unpatented: Poland's innovation profile

Selected European Innovation Scoreboard 2025 indicators, Poland, EU = 100 (EU rank in brackets)



European Innovation Scoreboard 2025:
65.9 points (EU = 100), 23rd in the EU,
"Emerging Innovator" category

Poland is improving faster than the EU:
+18.0 points since 2018 against +12.6 for
the EU

The most honest "light and shade" in a single chart. Poland ranks fourth in the EU for design applications, ninth for cloud adoption and twelfth for tertiary attainment — and at the same time in the bottom five for patents, venture capital, new doctorates and publications among the most-cited.

The human capital is there; what is missing is the conversion into intellectual property and risk finance. European Research Council grants show the same: the "widening" countries (Poland included) are 25% of the EU population and 5% of ERC grants — not only because applications are rejected, but because there are many times fewer of them.

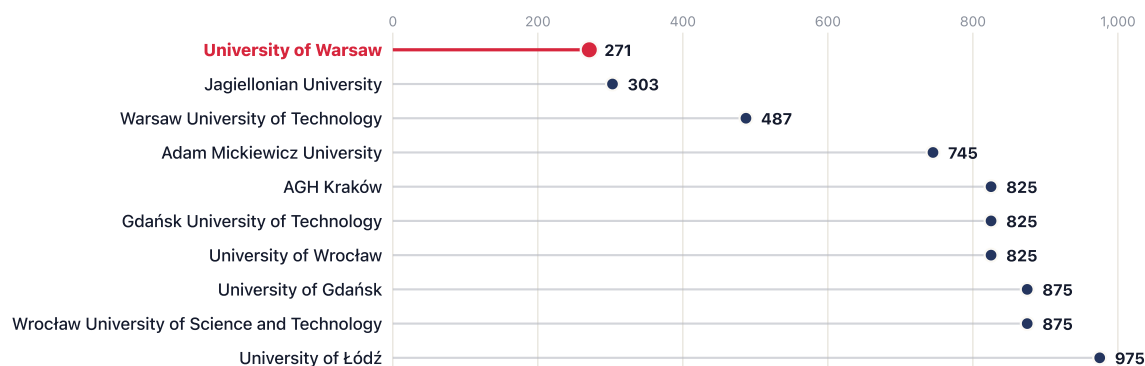
SOURCES

1. Komisja Europejska, DG RTD — European Innovation Scoreboard 2025, Country profile: Poland <https://ec.europa.eu/assets/rtd/eis/2025/ec_rtd_eis-country-profile-pl.pdf> (2025-07)

FIG. 6.6

Second in EU maths, no university in the world's top 200

Position in the QS World University Rankings 2026 (lower = better), the ten highest-ranked Polish universities



QS World University Rankings 2026: 20 Polish universities; the highest are the University of Warsaw (271st) and the Jagiellonian University (303rd)

1,322,800 students (2025/26) after the trough of 1,204,000 in 2019/20; 108,600 foreigners in 2024/25 (8.5%)

The most telling crack in this chapter: a country with the EU's second-best PISA maths score and a world-class olympiad record has not a single university in the global top 200. The University of Warsaw fell 13 places in 2026, the Jagiellonian rose nine; Warsaw University of Technology sits near the 500 mark.

Student numbers are rising again after years of decline (1.32 million), and women make up 58% of students. Internationalisation went into reverse in 2025/26: the number of foreign students fell by 7,100 to 97,950 (OPI PIB) after visa and language requirements were tightened — the only clear regression in this chapter.

SOURCES

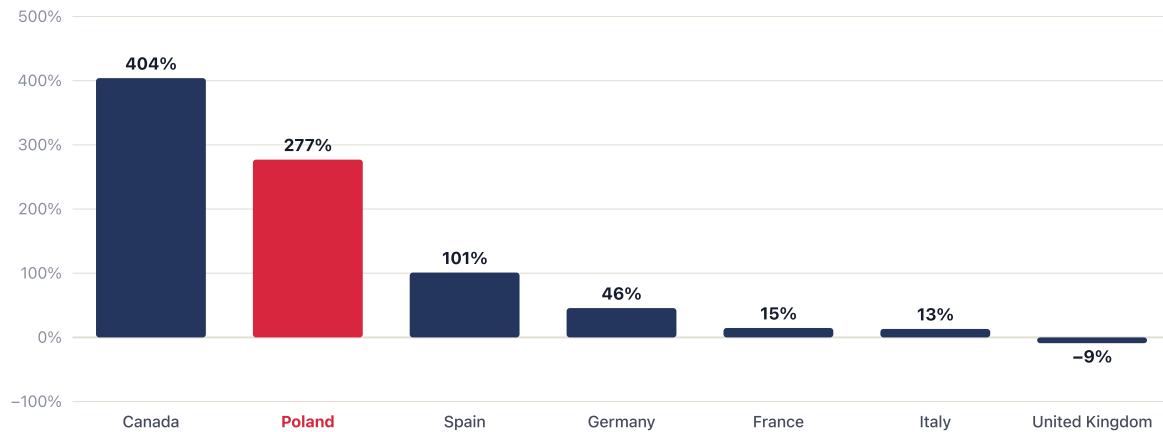
1. KRASP — zestawienie QS World University Rankings 2026 (na podstawie [topuniversities.com](https://www.topuniversities.com)) <<https://www.krasp.org.pl/files/public/Rankingi/QS/QS%20World%20University%20Rankings%202026.pdf>> (2025-06)
2. GUS — Szkolnictwo wyższe w roku akademickim 2025/2026 <<https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/edukacja/edukacja/szkolnictwo-wyzsze-w-roku-akademickim-20252026,8,12.html>> (2026-06)

Universities ranked in bands (e.g. 741–750, 801–850) are shown at the middle of the band.

FIG. 6.7

The leap into space: Poland's ESA subscription up 277%

Change in subscriptions at the ESA Council at Ministerial level 2025 (CM25) versus CM22, %, selected states



Poland in ESA since 19 November 2012 (20th member state); subscription for 2026–2028: EUR 731 m against EUR 194 m three years earlier

Ignis (Ax-4): launch 25 June 2025, a 20-day mission, 13 Polish experiments and the "Lessons from Space" education programme

Forty-seven years separate Mirosław Hermaszewski's flight (1978) from the Ignis mission (2025) — and in the same year Poland declared the largest percentage increase in its ESA subscription among the Agency's European members. The money goes mainly into optional programmes: Earth observation,

telecommunications and technologies for Poland's space industry.

Mind the numbers: Poland's subscription comes in three forms — EUR 731 m (the multi-year CM25 subscription), about EUR 193 m (the annual 2025 contribution) and EUR 550 m (optional programmes only). One chart uses the first, consistently.

SOURCES

1. [Payload Space — ESA Secures Record Funding Levels at 2025 Council of Ministers \(rozbiecie na kraje\)](https://payloadspace.com/esa-secures-record-funding-levels-at-2025-council-of-ministers/) <<https://payloadspace.com/esa-secures-record-funding-levels-at-2025-council-of-ministers/>> (2025-11)
2. [ESA — Ignis: first Polish space mission with ESA's Sławosz Uznański-Wiśniewski begins](https://www.esa.int/Science_Exploration/Human_and_Robotic_Exploration/ignis/Ignis_First_space_mission_for_ESA_s_Slawosz_Uznanski-Wisniewski_begins) <https://www.esa.int/Science_Exploration/Human_and_Robotic_Exploration/ignis/Ignis_First_space_mission_for_ESA_s_Slawosz_Uznanski-Wisniewski_begins> (2025-06)

The country breakdown comes from a trade publication (ESA publishes only the total: about EUR 22.3 bn). Canada is a cooperating state, not a European member.

CHAPTER 7

Culture and the arts: from Chopin to The Witcher

Poland hosts the world's most coveted piano competition, has five literary Nobel laureates, a poster school that taught the world, and video games sold in tens of millions of copies. Museums break attendance records — reading stands still.

Culture is the part of the Polish brand with the widest reach and the weakest link to the country's recognition: the world knows Chopin, Lem, The Witcher, the Polish poster and Penderecki, and less often knows where they come from. This chapter measures culture where it can be measured — in collections, attendance, competition entries, rankings and print runs — and does not skip the less flattering: almost six in ten adults read no books, and in the global soft-power ranking Poland is thirty-first.

FIG. 7.1

WOŚP: a quarter of a billion złoty in one day, year after year

Amount raised by the Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity in successive finales, PLN m, 2019–2026



34 finales: about PLN 2.58 bn in total; 2026: PLN 263.5 m — the third-best result ever, –8.9% on the 2025 record

34th Finale (25 January 2026): 1,681 local collection hubs, 88 of them abroad, about 120,000 volunteers

Poland's mass philanthropy has one gigantic, stable channel: a one-day collection that has been funding equipment for children's hospitals for three decades. Six years of uninterrupted growth — from PLN 176 m to 289 m — were broken only by the 2026 finale, and even that was the third-best result ever.

The contrast with everyday engagement is telling: according to Statistics Poland only 28% of Poles aged 15–89 did any volunteer work in a four-week period (2022), and only 5% in organisations. Poles mobilise spectacularly for a day and in a crisis (a peak of 37% after the invasion of Ukraine), less often systematically.

SOURCES

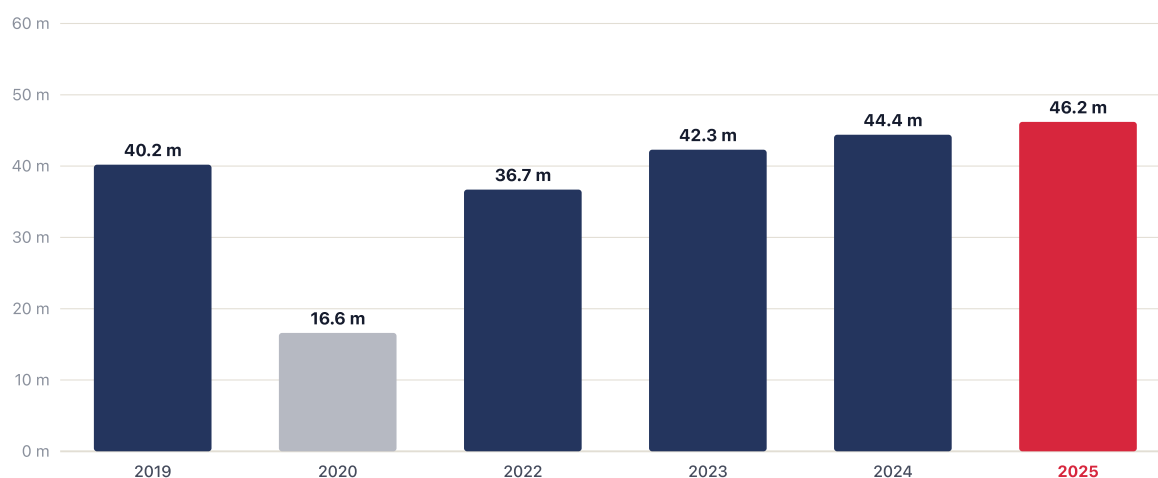
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2. NIW-CRSO — Wolontariat i aktywność społeczna w Polsce 2020–2024. Synteza badań <<https://niw.gov.pl/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Wolontariat-i-aktywnosc-spoieczna-w-Polsce-2020-2024.pdf>> (2026-05)

Final amounts (not the figures declared on the day). wosp.org.pl blocks automated retrieval — values from a table sourced to the Foundation's announcements.

FIG. 7.2

Museums bursting at the seams: a record 46 million visitors

Museum visitors in Poland, million people, 2019–2025 (no confirmed value for 2021)



2019: 40.2 m · 2020: 16.6 m · 2025: 46.2 m (+4.2% y/y) — 994 museums and branches, 14.1 m free admissions

Cinemas 2025: 49.7 m viewers; 302 films produced (+15.3% y/y)

The pandemic collapse has been more than made up: museum attendance is now 15% higher than in 2019, and art museums — with 17.7 m visitors — are the most popular. Mazovia and Lesser Poland attract 59% of all visitors.

Cultural institutions are bursting at the seams, but reading (the last chart of this chapter) stands still — we visit museums and cinemas more and more often, we do not read more.

SOURCES

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2. GUS — Kinematografia w 2025 r. <<https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/kultura-turystyka-sport/kultura/>> (2026)

FIG. 7.3

Poland attracts: tourism, heritage, diaspora

Tourism, UNESCO heritage, the diaspora and the Chopin Competition

21.4 m

foreign tourists in 2025

+8.5% y/y; 2nd in the EU for growth in overnight stays

PLN 94 bn

spent by tourists in Poland

+9.5% y/y; 637,000 people working in tourism

18

UNESCO World Heritage sites

from Kraków and Wieliczka (1978) to central Gdynia (2026)

22 m

people of Polish descent abroad

in 138 countries; USA 10 m, Brazil 3 m (Atlas of the Polish Diaspora)

642

entries to the 2025 Chopin Competition

a record; final tickets sold out in 2 minutes

30 m

copies of Lem's books

translated into over 40 languages (estate's declaration)

2025: 21.4 m foreign tourists (+8.5%), their spending PLN 41.5 bn; total tourist spending PLN 94 bn — 39% more than in 2019

Most visited cities 2025: Warsaw 8.7 m, Kraków 5.2 m, Gdańsk 2.9 m tourists

Tourism is breaking records after the pandemic — 2025 was the best year ever, and Poland was second in the EU for growth in overnight stays. The heritage is unique on a world scale: Kraków and Wieliczka were on the very first UNESCO list in 1978, alongside the Galápagos and Yellowstone.

The Chopin Competition remains a first-class Polish symbolic export — with a paradox: Poland runs the world's most prestigious piano competition and has won it only four times (most recently Rafał Blechacz in 2005; in 2025 the American Eric Lu won).

SOURCES

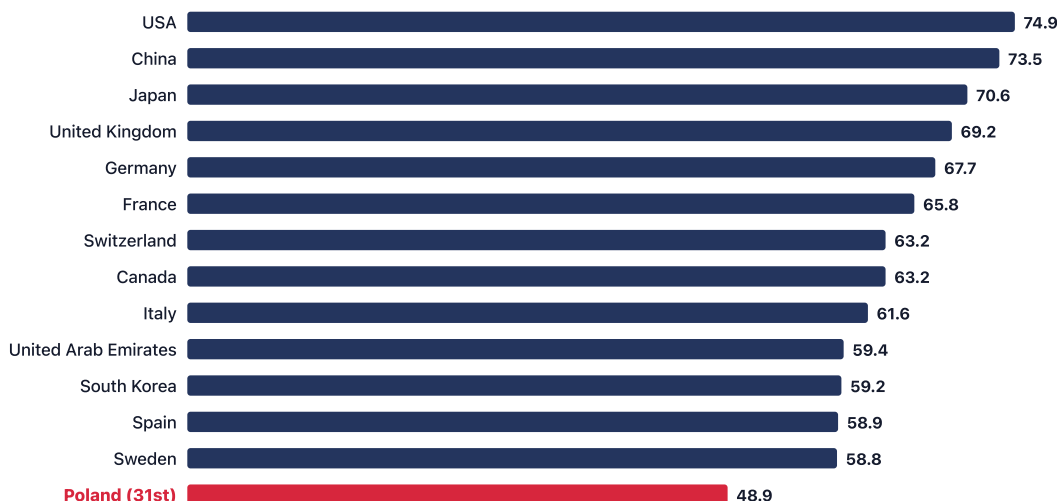
1. GUS — informacja prasowa „Moda na Polskę! 2025 rok pod znakiem rekordów w turystyce” <<https://stat.gov.pl/dla-mediow/informacje-prasowe/moda-na-polske-2025-rok-pod-znakiem-rekordow-w-turystyce,52,1.html>> (2026)
2. Wikipedia (EN) — List of World Heritage Sites in Poland <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_World_Heritage_Sites_in_Poland> (2026-08)
3. GUS — informacja prasowa o dashboardzie „Atlas Polonii i Polaków za granicą” <<https://stat.gov.pl/dla-mediow/informacje-prasowe/polacy-w-138-krajach-na-swiecie-dashboard-atlas-polonii-i-polakow-za-granica-to-nowe-spojrzenie-na-22-miliony-polakow-mieszkajacych-pozza-krajem,40,1.html>> (2025)
4. Wikipedia (EN) — XIX International Chopin Piano Competition <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/XIX_International_Chopin_Piano_Competition> (2025-10)
5. Oficjalny serwis Stanisława Lema (solaris.lem.pl) <<https://solaris.lem.pl/>> (2026)

The number of UNESCO sites (18, with Gdynia listed in 2026) — to be confirmed at whc.unesco.org; the 22 m figure is an official compilation by diplomatic posts, based on host-country statistics and estimates.

FIG. 7.4

A brand weaker than the economy: Poland 31st in the Global Soft Power Index

Global Soft Power Index 2026, points (0–100): the top thirteen and Poland



Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index 2026: 31st of 193, 48.9 points — between Luxembourg and India

For comparison: the 21st-largest economy in the world (nominal GDP) and 22nd in the Global Peace Index

Poland's soft power clearly lags behind its economic and military weight. In the Brand Finance ranking the country sits 31st — ten points behind Spain and Sweden — despite its marked rise in recent years in the safety and happiness rankings (chapter 12).

It is a gap this document partly tries to fill: Poland's strongest assets — the pace of development, safety, science, high culture, games — are less known abroad than the stereotypes.

SOURCES

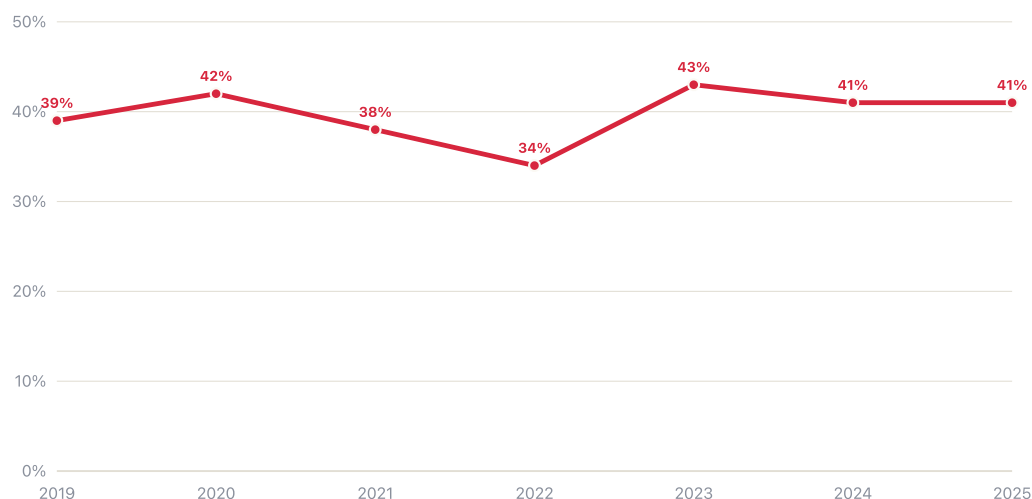
1. [Brand Finance — Global Soft Power Index 2026, executive summary](https://brandfinance.com/insights/global-soft-power-index-2026-executive-summary) <<https://brandfinance.com/insights/global-soft-power-index-2026-executive-summary>> (2026-02)

The full table of 193 countries is not publicly available; Poland's position (31st, 48.9 points) is confirmed by two independent reviews of the ranking — to be verified against the full report.

FIG. 7.5

We go to museums, we do not read more: 41% of Poles with a book

Share of Poles (15+) who read at least one book in the year, %, 2019–2025



2025: 41% read at least one book in the year — the same as a year earlier; 41–43% for three years

Women 47% vs men 34%; ages 15–18 56%; residents of cities over 500,000 71%

The most interesting counterpoint to the record attendances at museums and cinemas: reading has stood still for three years at about 41–43%, and almost six in ten adults did not read a single book in the year. Internal differences are huge — from 34% among men to 71% in the largest cities.

The country of five literary Nobel laureates and the world's most-translated science-fiction writer reads less than most of Western Europe. Polish high culture has global reach; the everyday practice of reading does not.

SOURCES

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FIG. 7.6

World firsts and Polish names in the arts: 1935–2024

World firsts, exhibitions and awards of Polish art, music and film

- 1935** ● **The Wieniawski Violin Competition in Poznań**
The world's oldest existing violin competition; 17th edition in October 2026.
- 1966** ● **International Poster Biennale in Warsaw**
The world's first open poster competition; 25th edition in 2016, organised by the Academy of Fine Arts since 2017.
- 1968** ● **The Poster Museum at Wilanów**
The world's first poster museum: over 36,000 Polish and 25,000 foreign posters.
- 1970** ● **Wojciech Fangor at the Guggenheim**
The first solo exhibition of a Polish artist at New York's Guggenheim Museum.
- 1987** ● **Krzysztof Penderecki — Grammys**
Four Grammy awards (1987–2017) plus the Trustees Award (1968) — the most-awarded Polish composer.
- 1992** ● **Górecki's Symphony No. 3 — a million copies**
The Nonesuch recording (Upshaw, Zinman): 38 weeks atop the US classical chart, no. 6 on the UK albums chart.
- 2020** ● **Tamara de Lempicka — USD 21.2 m**
Portrait de Marjorie Ferry, Christie's London — the highest price for a work by a Polish artist.
- 2022** ● **Magdalena Abakanowicz at Tate Modern**
The retrospective "Every Tangle of Thread and Rope" (Nov 2022 – May 2023); Agora in Chicago: 106 figures.
- 2022** ● **Małgorzata Mirga-Tas in Venice · Jerzy Skolimowski in Cannes**
The first Roma artist in a national Biennale pavilion; "EO" — Jury Prize in Cannes.
- 2023** ● **Agnieszka Holland — "Green Border"**
Special Jury Prize at the 80th Venice Film Festival.
- 2024** ● **Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw**
The new building on Plac Defilad (Thomas Phifer); about 50,000 visitors in the first three days.

The Wieniawski Competition (1935) — the world's oldest existing violin competition; the Warsaw Poster Biennale (1966) — the first open poster competition; the Poster Museum at Wilanów (1968) — the world's first poster museum (over 61,000 posters)

Poland at the Venice Biennale since 1932; 2022: the first Roma artist ever in a national pavilion (Małgorzata Mirga-Tas)

Polish visual art has a feature that is easy to overlook: several times it was the first in the world. The oldest violin competition, the first open poster competition and the first poster museum are institutions, and the Polish poster school (Tomaszewski, Cieśliewicz, Starowieyski) taught graphic design to half the world.

Abroad, Polish names are back in the first league: the Abakanowicz retrospective at Tate Modern, the Lempicka record, prizes in Cannes and Venice. A warning sign: the Poster Biennale lost its regularity after 2016 and the Łódź Design Festival cancelled its 2026 edition — institutional continuity in Poland is sometimes harder than talent.

SOURCES

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2. [Międzynarodowy Konkurs Skrzypcowy im. Henryka Wieniawskiego — strona oficjalna](https://wieniawski.com/) <<https://wieniawski.com/>> (2026)
3. [Tate Modern — Magdalena Abakanowicz \(wystawa\)](https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/magdalena-abakanowicz) <<https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/magdalena-abakanowicz>> (2022)

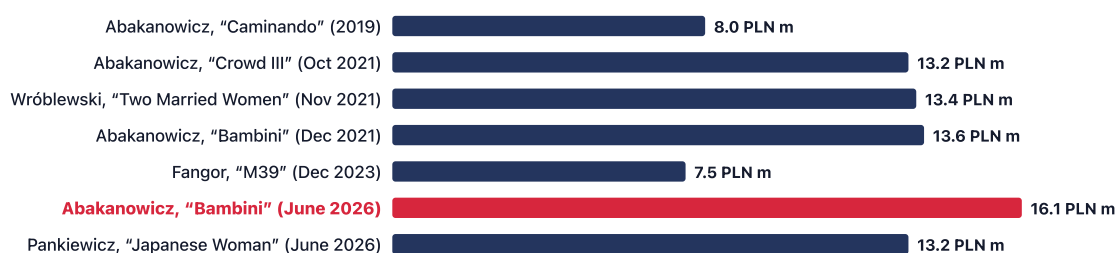
4. [Zachęta — Pawilon Polski w Wenecji, archiwum Biennale Sztuki; La Biennale di Venezia — werdykt 80. MFF](https://la.biennale.art.pl/en/archiwum/art-biennale/) <<https://la.biennale.art.pl/en/archiwum/art-biennale/>> (2026)
5. [Wikipedia \(EN\) — Wojciech Fangor; Krzysztof Penderecki; Symphony No. 3 \(Górecki\); Tamara de Lempicka \(za źródłami pierwotnymi\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._3_(Górecki)) <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._3_\(G%C3%B3recki\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._3_(G%C3%B3recki))> (2026)

Wieniawski, the Biennale, the Poster Museum, Tate, Venice, Cannes — primary sources; Fangor, Penderecki, Górecki, Lempicka — encyclopaedic entries with references (NYT, grammy.com, Christie's).

FIG. 7.7

What Polish art costs: auction records at home

Highest prices for works by Polish artists at auctions in Poland, PLN m, 2019–2026



National record: PLN 16.1 m — Magdalena Abakanowicz, "Bambini", Polswiss Art, 2 June 2026 (PLN 13.4 m + buyer's premium); the previous record PLN 13.6 m for the same work (Dec 2021); Józef Pankiewicz, "Japanese Woman" — PLN 13.2 m (June 2026), the artist's world record

Tamara de Lempicka's record was set in London: USD 21.2 m (2020) — about six times the best result in Poland

The contrast of scale is the whole story: the most expensive work ever sold at auction in Poland (about USD 4 m) is less than a fifth of Lempicka's London record. The Polish art market is young and narrow — records fall on single canvases by Abakanowicz, Wróblewski, Fangor,

Pankiewicz — but it is growing: "Japanese Woman" beat Pankiewicz's previous record more than threefold within three months, and Abakanowicz's "Bambini" — resold in June 2026 — set a new national record.

SOURCES

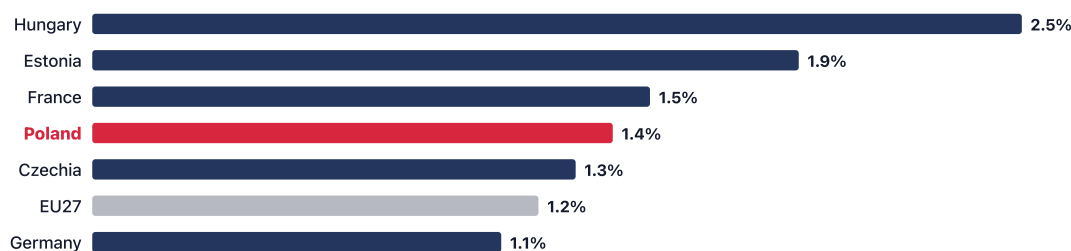
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2. [Wikipedia \(EN\) — Magdalena Abakanowicz; Wojciech Fangor; Tamara de Lempicka \(za relacjami Polskiego Radia, The First News, Rzeczpospolitej, Christie's\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magdalena_Abakanowicz) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magdalena_Abakanowicz> (2026)

Records 2019–2023 per encyclopaedic entries with references (medium confidence); 2026 — auction-house announcements (Polswiss Art, DESA Unicum); prices incl. buyer's premium. The auction market in Poland: DESA Unicum held five collector auctions in 2025 with a turnover of PLN 28.5 m.

FIG. 7.8

Public culture: spending above the EU average, audiences growing

General government expenditure on recreation, culture and religion (COFOG 08), % of GDP, 2024



Public spending on recreation, culture and religion: Poland 1.4% of GDP (2024) vs EU 1.2%; cultural services alone 0.6% — same as the EU, more than France (0.5%) and Germany (0.4%)

Theatres and music institutions 2025: 206 institutions, 63,100 performances and concerts, 13.0 m spectators (+6.7% y/y) — the most since the pandemic

Poland spends more public money on culture than the EU average — more than Germany and Czechia, less than Hungary and Estonia — and it shows in the institutions: 994 museums with record attendance, 206 theatres and music

institutions with 13 m spectators, 174 of them public, and for 93% the local government is the organiser. The institutions are in good shape; it is their continuity that can be fragile (the Poster Biennale, the Łódź Design Festival).

SOURCES

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2. GUS — Działalność teatrów i instytucji muzycznych w 2025 r. <<https://stat.gov.pl/en/topics/culture-tourism-sport/culture/activity-of-theatres-and-music-institutions-in-2025,11,10.html>> (2026-04)

2024 data provisional; COFOG 08 covers recreation, culture and religion together.

CHAPTER 8

Sport: a narrow band, strong results

Iga Świątek, the volleyball team, ski jumpers, female athletes — Polish sport has a narrow but very strong band of success and an increasingly female face. Fans are back in the stadiums; the national football team will miss the World Cup.

For a foreigner, sport is the simplest way into the Polish brand — the names Lewandowski and Świątek are known to people who could not find Poland on a map. This chapter gathers the numbers: records, titles, medals and attendance — and one honest counterpoint about football.

FIG. 8.1

Sport in six numbers: tennis, volleyball, ski jumping, women

Poland's most important sporting achievements of recent years

6

Grand Slam titles for Iga Świątek

125 weeks at WTA no. 1; Wimbledon 2025 won 6–0, 6–0

3

volleyball world titles (men)

1974, 2014, 2018; Olympic silver 2024; FIVB no. 1 (2026)

41

Lewandowski goals in one Bundesliga season

2020/21 — all-time record; 89 goals for Poland

3

Olympic golds for Anita Włodarczyk

2012, 2016, 2020 — hammer, world record

10

medals at Paris 2024

1 gold, 4 silver, 5 bronze; 8 won by women

308

Summer Olympic medals all-time

73 gold, 93 silver, 142 bronze; 23rd in the all-time table

Paris 2024: 10 medals, 8 of them won by women; the only gold — Aleksandra Mirosław (speed climbing, world record 6.06 s)

Milano Cortina 2026: 4 medals — the best winter result since 2014; Kamil Stoch: 3 Olympic golds (2014, 2018)

Polish sport has a narrow but very strong band of success — and an increasingly female face. Iga Świątek, with six Grand Slam titles and 125 weeks at the top of the ranking, is the most successful Polish sportswoman in history; in Paris eight of ten medals were won by women.

The volleyball team is the most consistent team discipline: three world golds and three Nations League titles in the last four editions. Robert Lewandowski broke Gerd Müller's 49-year-old record. The national football team — as above — remains the weak point.

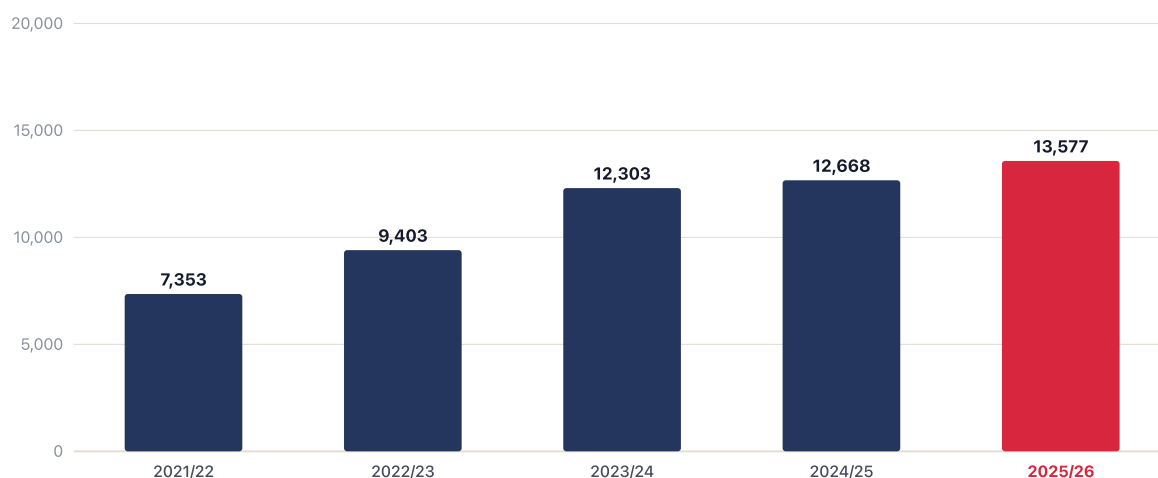
SOURCES

1. Wikipedia (EN) — Iga Świątek; Poland men's national volleyball team; Robert Lewandowski; Poland at the Olympics <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poland_at_the_Olympics> (2026-08)
2. Wikipedia (EN) — Poland at the 2026 Winter Olympics <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poland_at_the_2026_Winter_Olympics> (2026-03)

FIG. 8.2

Fans are back in the stands: record Ekstraklasa attendance

Average attendance at Ekstraklasa football matches, seasons 2021/22–2025/26



2021/22: 7,353 per match → 2025/26: 13,577 (+85% in four seasons); 2025/26 season: about 4.15 m spectators

Lech Poznań 31,065 — the first club in the league's history to average over 30,000; record round: 178,030 spectators

National team: 2–3 defeat to Sweden in the play-off final (31 March 2026) — no 2026 World Cup

One of the sharpest upward trends in the whole dataset: in four seasons average league attendance rose 85%, and Lech Poznań became the first club in history to average over 30,000. The new Euro 2012 stadiums have stopped standing empty.

An honest counterpoint: the fans are in the stands, the national team's results are not — Poland lost the play-off to Sweden and, after two consecutive World Cups (2018, 2022), will miss the 2026 tournament.

SOURCES

1. Ekstraklasa SA — komunikat: rekordowy sezon na trybunach, 178 tys. widzów w 34. kolejce, ponad 4 miliony w całych rozgrywkach <<https://ekstraklasa.org/aktualnosci/rekordowy-sezon-na-trybunach-178-tys-widzow-na-meczach-34-kolejki-ponad-4-miliony-w-calych-rozgrywkach/>> (2026-05)
2. UEFA — Sweden 3-2 Poland, European Qualifiers play-off final <<https://www.uefa.com/european-qualifiers/news/02a3-204787cdd9bb-045ee7618426-1000--sweden-3-2-poland-highlights-viktor-gyokeres-sends-sweden/>> (2026-03)

CHAPTER 9

Nature: forests growing, bison back, water scarce

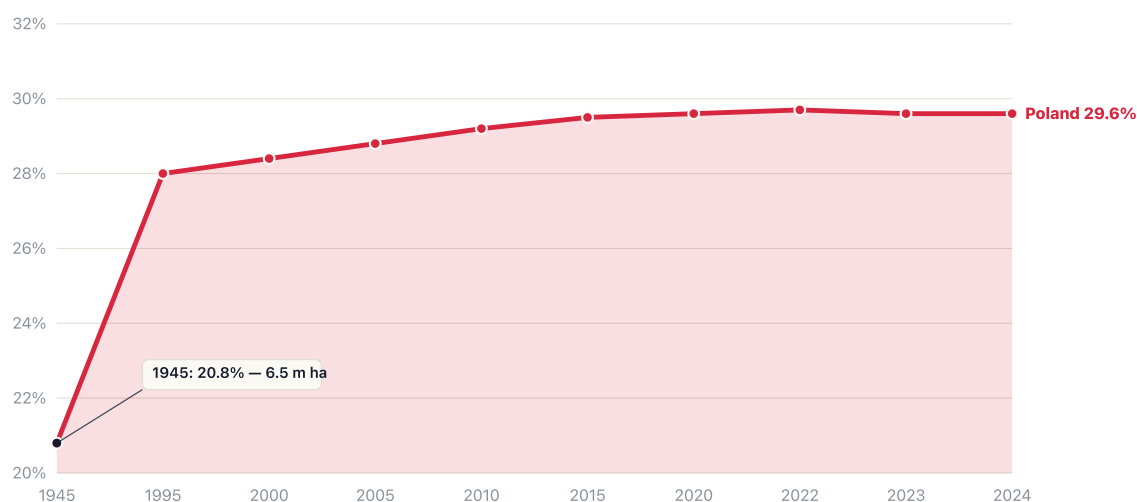
Forest cover has grown without interruption since the war, Poland has the world's largest bison population, one of Europe's largest wolf populations and the continent's last primeval lowland forest. The weak points are concrete: water per head under half the EU average, afforestation collapsed, farmland birds in retreat.

Poland's nature has hard numbers that hold up against Europe: 29.6% of the country under forest (1945: 20.8%), over 80% of forests public and open to all, 39.6% of land under protection against 26.6% on average in the EU, 23 national parks visited by 16 million people a year, and the lowest share of threatened bird species in the Union. The strongest card is the large mammals — bison, wolf, lynx, bear, beaver and elk — whose populations have multiplied since 2000. The dark sides are shown by the same method: the water deficit, the Oder disaster and the collapse of afforestation.

FIG. 9.1

The forest recovery curve: forest cover 1945 → 2024

Share of forests in the country's area, %, 1945–2024 (Statistics Poland, geodetic area)



20.8% (1945) → 29.6% (2024): +2.8 m ha of forest; 9.29 m ha; government target 33% by 2050

80.9% of forests are public, 77.0% managed by the State Forests — open to all; 0.248 ha of forest per inhabitant

By the FAO definition: 31.1% (EU: 40.0%) — 7th in the EU by absolute forest area (9.5 m ha)

One graphic tells both the success and the slowdown: since the war forest cover has risen by almost nine percentage points, but since 2020 the curve has been flat. Polish forests are overwhelmingly common property and

universally accessible — a rarity in Western Europe, where private forests dominate.

Why the curve stalled is shown by the chapter's last chart: the afforestation programme has practically expired.

SOURCES

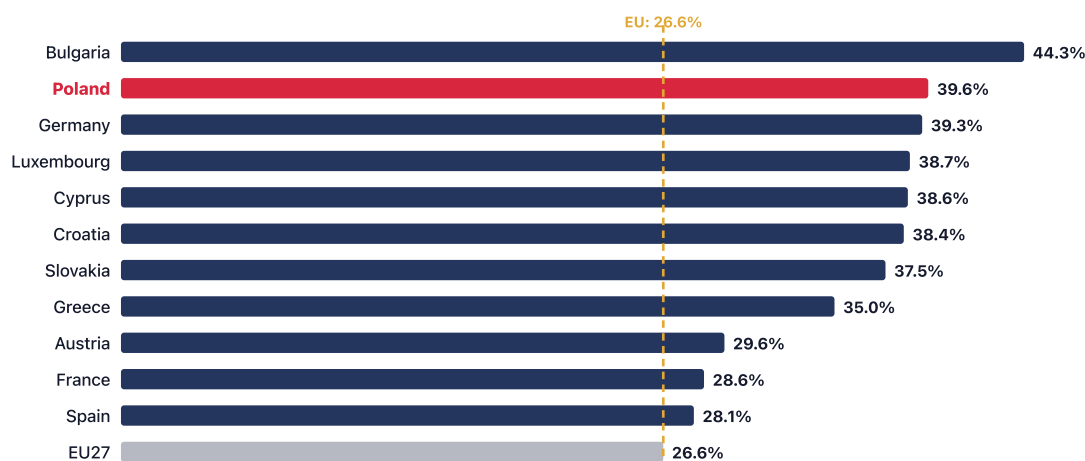
1. GUS — Rocznik Statystyczny Leśnictwa 2025 (tablica przeglądowa „Ważniejsze dane o leśnictwie”, s. 26–28; 1945: 20,8%) <https://stat.gov.pl/download/gfx/portalinformacyjny/pl/defaultaktualnosci/5515/13/8/1/rocznik_statystyczny_leśnictwa_2025.pdf> (2025-12)
2. Bank Światowy / FAO — forest area (% of land area), AG.LND.FRST.ZS <<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/AG.LND.FRST.T.ZS>> (2026)

Two correct values: 29.6% (Statistics Poland, of geodetic area) and 31.1% (FAO, of land area) — never on one axis.

FIG. 9.2

How much of Europe is protected: terrestrial protected areas in the EU

Terrestrial protected areas, % of land area, 2024 (World Bank / WDPA), selected EU countries



Poland 39.6% of land area (World Bank, 2024) vs 26.6% on average in the EU and 16.4% worldwide — 2nd in the Union after Bulgaria

National definition (Statistics Poland): 32.2% of the country under legal protection; Natura 2000: 19.6% (EU: 18.6%); 23 national parks = 1.0% of the country

In Europe's top tier: by share of protected areas Poland trails only Bulgaria in the Union. There are 2,699 m² of protected land per inhabitant — most in Warmia-Masuria (8,385 m²), least in Silesia (608 m²); the record holder is the Holy Cross region with 65% of its area under protection.

The Natura 2000 network (1,003 sites) covers 19.6% of the country — slightly above the EU norm, not at its top. The 23 national parks are only 1% of the area but draw 16.4 million visitors a year; the Tatra park alone receives nearly one in three of them.

SOURCES

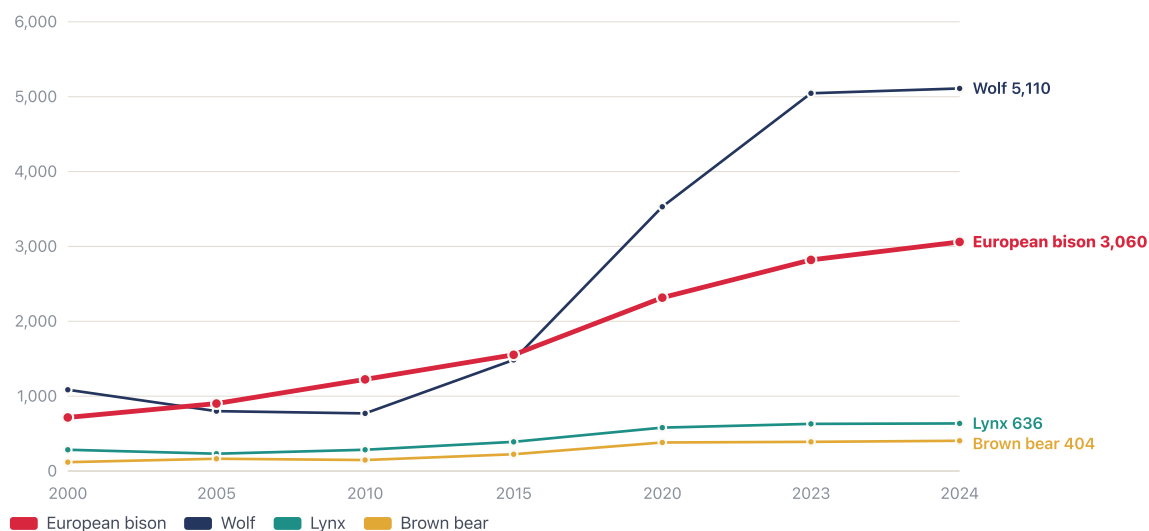
1. GUS — Ochrona środowiska 2025 (rozdz. 5; tabl. 16(302) za bazą Banku Światowego / WDPA) <https://stat.gov.pl/download/gfx/portalinformacyjny/pl/defaultaktualnosci/5484/1/26/1/ochrona_srodowiska_2025.pdf> (2025-12)

Two different measures: Statistics Poland 32.2% (forms of protection under Polish law, corrected for overlap) and the World Bank 39.6% (WDPA method) — not contradictory, not comparable.

FIG. 9.3

The great return: bison, wolf, lynx and bear 2000 → 2024

Numbers of selected protected species in Poland, individuals, 2000–2024 (Statistics Poland after GDOŚ; bison per the Pedigree Book)



Bison 715 → 3,060 (×4.3) — the world's largest population; wolf 1,086 → 5,110 (×4.7); bear 118 → 404 (×3.4); lynx 285 → 636 (×2.2)

Beaver 24,500 → 156,500 (×6.4); elk 18,600 (2015) → 45,700 (2025), +146%; wild boar 264,800 → 59,800 (–77%, ASF)

The strongest card of Polish nature is its large mammals. The European bison — a species extinct in the wild in 1919 — numbers 3,060 in Poland today, more than anywhere in the world; the Bison Pedigree Book has been kept in Poland continuously since 1947. Wolf and lynx rebounded precisely after protection (1998 and

1995), bear and beaver after 1952; the elk, almost exterminated after the war, is today one of Central Europe's most spectacular comebacks.

The only large mammal in clear decline is the wild boar: –77% in a decade, the effect of African swine fever and sanitary culling.

SOURCES

1. GUS — Ochrona środowiska 2025, tabl. 32(198) „Ważniejsze zwierzęta chronione” (dane GDOŚ; żubr — Księga Rodowodowa Żubrów) <https://stat.gov.pl/download/gfx/portalinformacyjny/pl/defaultaktualnosci/5484/1/26/1/ochrona_srodowiska_2025_tablice.zip> (2025–12)
2. GUS — Rocznik Statystyczny Leśnictwa 2025, tabl. 3(117) „Wybrane zwierzęta łowne” (łoś, dzik; dane DGLP i PZŁ) <https://stat.gov.pl/download/gfx/portalinformacyjny/pl/defaultaktualnosci/5515/13/8/1/rocznik_statystyczny_leśnictwa_2025.pdf> (2025–12)

Apart from the bison (a named register) the counts are estimates by regional directorates, the State Forests and parks; game species (elk, boar) are counted by another method — not on one axis.

FIG. 9.4

From the Baltic to the Tatras: nature in six numbers

Parks, coast, mountains, birds

23

national parks

314,294 ha = 1.0% of the country; 16.4 m visitors (2024)

19.6%

of the country in the Natura 2000 network

EU: 18.6%; 1,003 sites

687 km

of Baltic coastline

Rysy 2,499 m; Hańcza 108.5 m — the deepest lake of the European Lowland

141,885 ha

Białowieża Forest (UNESCO)

Europe's last primeval lowland forest; about 25% of the world's bison

10%

of bird species threatened

the lowest in the whole EU (2024)

2,699 m²

of protected area per inhabitant

Holy Cross region: 65% of its area protected

Białowieża Forest — Poland's only natural UNESCO site (141,885 ha on both sides of the border), Europe's last primeval lowland forest, about 900 bison

Share of threatened bird species: 10% — the lowest in the EU (Estonia 41%, Denmark about 35%); 87–100 m breeding pairs a year; crane ×3 since 2001, white stork stable (97.9% of survey plots)

Poland is a lowland country with a narrow but very high mountain accent: over half its area lies between 100 and 199 m above sea level, land above 500 m is 3% of the country — and one peak reaches 2,499 m. In between: 687 km of coast, thousands of lakes, Central Europe's

largest peat bogs on the Biebrza, and Białowieża Forest, Poland's only natural UNESCO site.

The birdlife surprises most: the share of species threatened with extinction is the lowest in the whole Union, and the crane has tripled in a quarter-century. The shadow of that story — farmland birds — is shown in the last chart.

SOURCES

1. GUS — Ochrona środowiska 2025 (rozdz. 1 „Warunki naturalne”, rozdz. 5 parki narodowe i Natura 2000) <https://stat.gov.pl/download/gfx/portalinformacyjny/pl/defaultaktualnosci/5484/1/26/1/ochrona_srodowiska_2025.pdf> (2025-12)
2. UNESCO World Heritage Centre — Białowieża Forest (wpis nr 33) <<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/33/>> (2014)
3. GIOŚ — Monitoring Ptaków Polski, raport dla Komisji Europejskiej (art. 12 Dyrektywy Ptasiej, 2019–2024) <<https://monitoringptakow.gios.gov.pl/aktualnosci/raport-dla-komisji-europejskiej-2025.html>> (2025)

FIG. 9.5

At the EU's tail end: water per inhabitant

Renewable freshwater resources per inhabitant, m³ a year, 2021, selected EU countries



Poland: 1,449 m³ of renewable freshwater per inhabitant a year vs 3,047 m³ on average in the EU (2021) — less than half

Not last in the EU: lower are Germany (1,286), Czechia (1,252), Hungary (623); in dry years resources fall below 40 bn m³

Oder 2022: about 360 tonnes of dead fish — the largest ecological disaster on a Polish river this century (a "golden alga" bloom favoured by salinity)

Statistics Poland says it plainly: "Poland is counted among countries poor in water resources." Average resources are about 60 bn m³ a year — France has 206 bn, Sweden 184 bn — and in dry years they fall below 40 bn. The honest thesis is "at the EU's tail end", not "lowest

in the EU": Germany, Czechia and Hungary have less.

The Oder disaster of summer 2022 — about 360 tonnes of dead fish, a toxic golden-alga bloom in a salinised river — showed how fragile the system is.

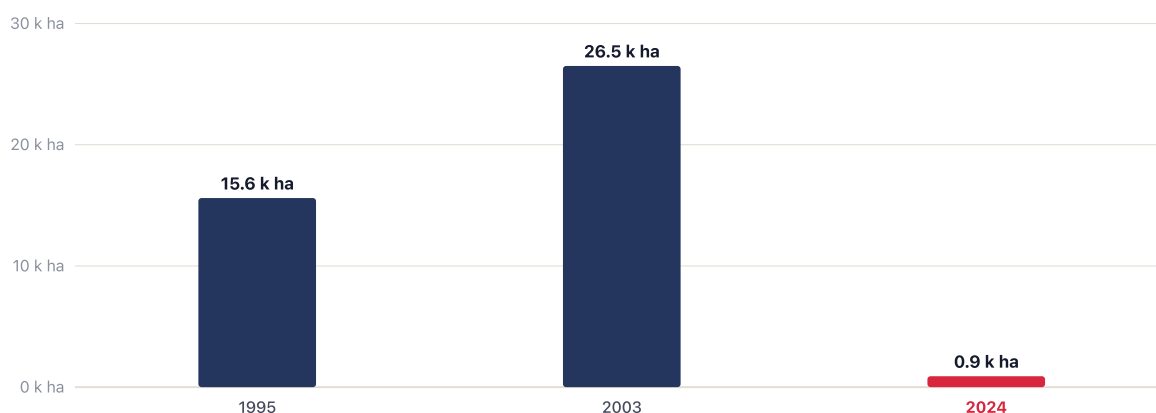
SOURCES

1. Bank Światowy / FAO AQUASTAT — renewable internal freshwater resources per capita, ER.H2O.INTR.PC <<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ER.H2O.INTR.PC>> (2026)
2. Komisja Europejska, Joint Research Centre — An EU analysis of the ecological disaster in the Oder River of 2022 <<https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC132271>> (2023)

FIG. 9.6

The collapse of afforestation and the retreat of farmland birds

Area of afforestation of non-forest land in Poland, thousand ha a year



Afforestation of non-forest land: 15,600 ha (1995) → a record 26,500 ha (2003) → 900 ha (2024), –94%

Farmland bird index (FBI, 2000 = 1.00): 0.76 in 2024 — near its historical low; forest birds: 1.28 (EU: 0.69 and 1.05)

The chapter's sharpest dark spot. The national afforestation programme, adopted in 1995, planted 270,700 ha in 1996–2024 — but in 2024 only 900 ha, thirty times less than in the record year 2003. The 33% forest-cover target for 2050 is unreachable at this pace.

The second shadow is the fields: the common farmland bird index has fallen by a quarter since 2000 — more slowly than the EU average, but in an unmistakably bad direction — while forest birds are gaining faster than anywhere in the Union.

SOURCES

1. GUS — Ochrona środowiska 2025, rozdz. „Grunty leśne i lesistość” (wykres 17 „Zalesienia gruntów”; wskaźniki FBI w rozdz. 5 za GIOŚ i Eurostatem) <https://stat.gov.pl/download/gfx/portalinformacyjny/pl/defaultaktualnosci/5484/1/26/1/ochrona_srodowiska_2025.pdf> (2025-12)

The Polish FBI covers 22 species, the EU's 39 — an approximate comparison; EU value for 2023, Polish for 2024.

CHAPTER 10

Architecture: from Kraków to Varso Tower

Eighteen UNESCO sites — from Kraków and Wieliczka on the very first list of 1978 to modernist Gdynia (2026). Over 81,000 registered monuments, an Old Town rebuilt from 85% destruction, and the European Union's tallest building. Three layers of one architecture.

Polish architecture is not one style but three layers on top of each other — and all three can be counted. Heritage: 18 UNESCO inscriptions, 81,187 immovable monuments, 133 Monuments of History, 7,011 manors and palaces. Reconstruction: Warsaw's Old Town made the UNESCO list not despite being a reconstruction but because of it. The present: Varso Tower (310 m) is the European Union's tallest building and Warsaw the only EU city with a skyscraper above 300 m; the Szczecin Philharmonic won the Mies van der Rohe Award (2015) and the Dialogue Centre Przełomy the World Building of the Year (2016).

FIG. 10.1

Eighteen UNESCO inscriptions, 1978–2026

Sites in Poland on the UNESCO World Heritage List by year of inscription

- 1978** ● **Historic Centre of Kraków · Wieliczka and Bochnia Salt Mines**
On the first UNESCO list in history (12 sites worldwide).
- 1979** ● **Auschwitz-Birkenau · Białowieża Forest**
Białowieża — Poland's only natural site; extended in 1992 and 2014 to 141,885 ha.
- 1980** ● **Historic Centre of Warsaw**
A city 85% destroyed, rebuilt 1945–1951 — inscribed for its contribution to world conservation doctrine.
- 1992** ● **Old City of Zamość**
Bernardo Morando's Renaissance "ideal city".
- 1997** ● **Castle of the Teutonic Order in Malbork · Medieval Toruń**
Malbork: "the most complete example of a Gothic brick castle" (UNESCO), inscribed area 18 ha.
- 1999** ● **Kalwaria Zebrzydowska**
A Mannerist pilgrimage complex.
- 2001** ● **Churches of Peace in Jawor and Świdnica**
Europe's largest timber-framed religious buildings (17th c.).
- 2003** ● **Wooden Churches of Southern Lesser Poland**
Six churches: Blizne, Binarowa, Dębno, Haczów, Lipnica Murowana, Sękowa.
- 2004** ● **Muskauer Park / Park Mużakowski**
A transboundary inscription with Germany.
- 2006** ● **Centennial Hall in Wrocław**
1913, Max Berg — the world's largest reinforced-concrete dome when built; Poland's only inscription under criterion (i).
- 2007** ● **Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians**
A serial inscription across 18 countries; the Polish components since 2021.
- 2013** ● **Wooden Tserkvas of the Carpathian Region**
16 tserkvas in Poland and Ukraine, 8 on the Polish side.
- 2017** ● **Tarnowskie Góry Lead-Silver-Zinc Mine**
With its underground water management system.
- 2019** ● **Krzemionki Prehistoric Striped Flint Mining Region**
Neolithic mines 5,000 years old.
- 2026** ● **Gdynia Modernist City Centre**
87.9 ha — Poland's largest urban inscription by area; "a break with historicism" (UNESCO).

Kraków and Wieliczka were on the very first World Heritage List (1978) alongside the Galápagos and Yellowstone; the newest inscription: Gdynia's modernist city centre (2026, 87.9 ha)

16 cultural and 2 natural sites (Białowieża Forest, Carpathian beech forests); 8 more on the tentative list

Eighteen inscriptions, almost half a century and a clear evolution: from medieval towns and salt mines through reconstruction, timber and reinforced concrete to 20th-century modernism. Gdynia — a city built in the twenty years of the

Second Republic as the country's gateway to the sea — is the newest and largest Polish inscription by area.

Eight more wait on the tentative list, including Gdańsk — "City of Memory and Freedom".

SOURCES

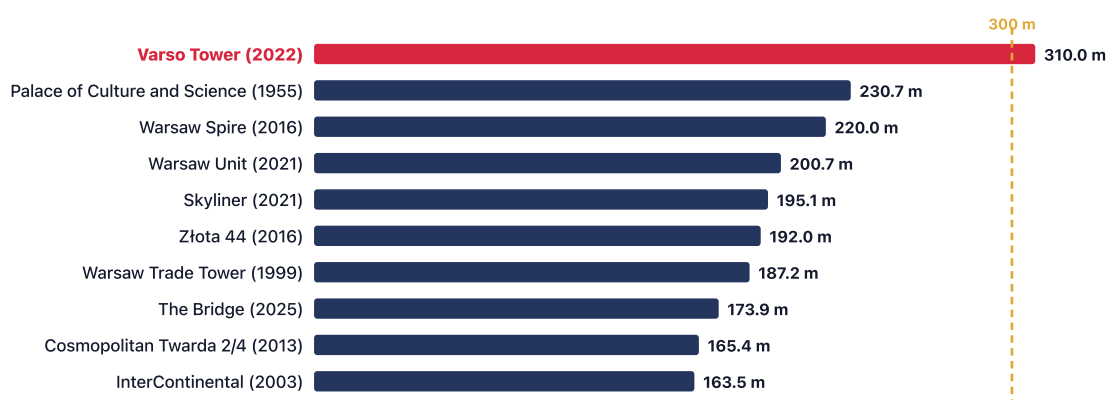
1. [UNESCO World Heritage Centre — State Party: Poland \(lista obiektów z latami wpisu\)](https://whc.unesco.org/en/states-parties/pl) <<https://whc.unesco.org/en/states-parties/pl>> (2026)
2. [UNESCO World Heritage Centre — Gdynia Modernist City Centre \(1715rev\); Historic Centre of Warsaw \(30\); Centennial Hall \(1165\)](https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1715/) <<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1715/>> (2026)

Compound dates (e.g. Wieliczka 1978/2008/2013 — inscription and extensions) are given by the year of the original inscription.

FIG. 10.2

The Union's tallest building: Varso Tower and the Warsaw skyline

Warsaw's tallest buildings, architectural height, m (CTBUH)



Varso Tower (2022, Foster + Partners): 310 m — the tallest building in the EU; Warsaw is the only EU-27 city with any building above 300 m (CTBUH)

Palace of Culture and Science (1955): 230.7 m architectural height (237 m to the spire tip) — Poland's tallest for 67 years

The chapter's strongest contemporary fact: filtering the full CTBUH database by EU country, Warsaw turns out to be the only city in the Union with a building above 300 m. Varso Tower stands

a few hundred metres from the Palace of Culture and Science — a 1955 Soviet gift that was the country's tallest building for 67 years. Two towers, two eras, one skyline.

SOURCES

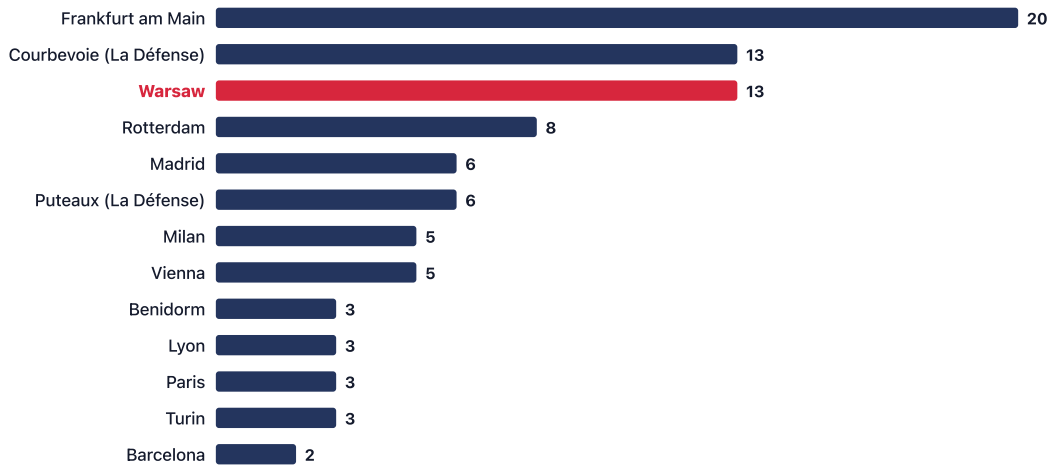
1. [CTBUH Skyscraper Center — Varso Tower; Warsaw \(lista budynków\); Palace of Culture and Science](https://www.skyscrapercenter.com/building/varso-tower/22631) <<https://www.skyscrapercenter.com/building/varso-tower/22631>> (2026)

Architectural height per CTBUH (without masts); the popular 237 m for the Palace is measured to the spire tip.

FIG. 10.3

Warsaw among the Union's skyscraper cities

Number of buildings at least 150 m tall, EU cities, 2026 (CTBUH)



Buildings 150 m+: Frankfurt 20, Courbevoie (La Défense) 13, Warsaw 13, Rotterdam 8, Madrid 6; across Europe Warsaw is fifth (Moscow 70, London 43)

Above 200 m: Warsaw 4; above 300 m: Warsaw 1 — the only one in the EU

With 13 buildings of 150 m+ Warsaw shares second place in the Union with Courbevoie, behind only Frankfurt. A necessary caveat: CTBUH counts municipalities, so the Paris business district is split into two entries. The

other Polish cities in the database have one skyscraper each — Gdańsk, Rzeszów, Wrocław — Warsaw is the exception in this category, not the rule.

SOURCES

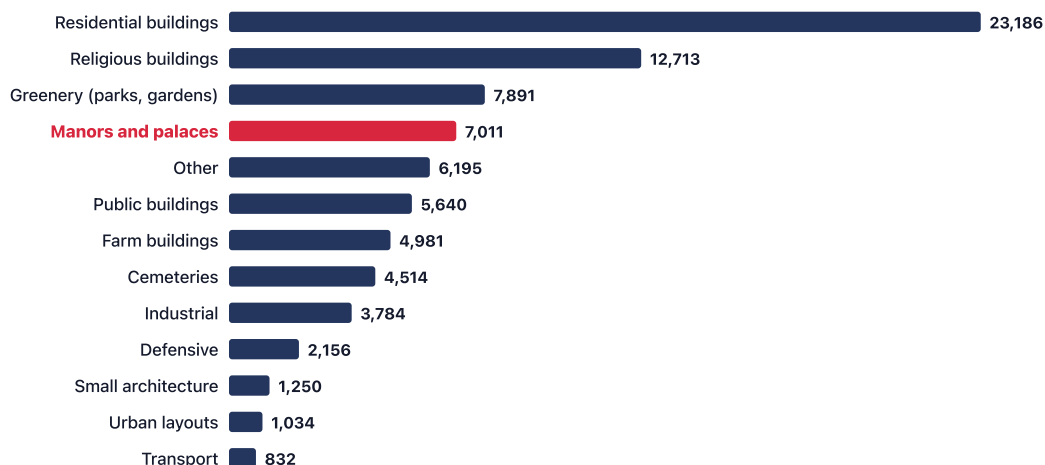
1. CTBUH Skyscraper Center — Cities by Number of 150m+ Buildings <<https://www.skyscrapercenter.com/cities>> (2026)

CTBUH classifies municipalities, not agglomerations: Paris's La Défense appears as Courbevoie (13) and Puteaux (6) — combined (19) it would overtake Warsaw.

FIG. 10.4

81,000 monuments: not only churches and castles

Immovable monuments in the heritage register by type, number of entries, as of 1 June 2026



81,187 immovable monuments in the register (1 June 2026): residential 28.6%, religious 15.7%, historic greenery 9.7%, manors and palaces 8.6%

7,011 manors and palaces + 2,156 defensive structures — over 9,100 residences and strongholds; most monuments: Lower Silesia 9,187, Mazovia 8,554, Greater Poland 8,023

A surprise: the reader expects churches and castles, but the register's largest category is townhouses and homes. Monument density is highest in the western and northern territories — Lower Silesia has 4.6 times as many entries as the Holy Cross region — because the pre-war

building stock survived there. Greater Poland, with 1,054 manors and palaces, wins the residence category though it is not the largest province: a legacy of a dense network of landed estates.

SOURCES

1. Narodowy Instytut Dziedzictwa / dane.gov.pl — Zestawienie danych statystycznych z rejestru zabytków (zabytki nieruchome, CSV) <<https://dane.gov.pl/pl/dataset/154>> (2026-06)

Counted from the raw NID CSV file (data as of 1 June 2026); the numbers are reproducible to the unit.

FIG. 10.5

Reconstruction and awards: six numbers about Polish architecture

From the reconstruction of Warsaw to the Mies van der Rohe Award

85%

of Warsaw destroyed (1945)

Old Town rebuilt 1945–1951, UNESCO 1980

1913

Centennial Hall — the world's largest reinforced-concrete dome

Max Berg, Wrocław; UNESCO 2006, criterion (i)

133

Monuments of History

the highest national form of protection; 15 in 1994, record 2017: +21 (the independence)

2015

Mies van der Rohe Award — Szczecin Philharmonic

Barozzi Veiga; the first and only Polish winner of the EU prize (since 1988)

2016

World Building of the Year — Dialogue Centre Przełomy

KWK Promes (Robert Konieczny), Szczecin

2016

European Museum of the Year — POLIN

Rainer Mahlamäki; ECS Gdańsk — Council of Europe Prize the same year

2016: Poland won both of Europe's main museum prizes at once — European Museum of the Year (POLIN) and the Council of Europe Museum Prize (European Solidarity Centre); in 2024 the Council of Europe prize went to the Sybir Memorial Museum

Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (Thomas Phifer, 2024): about 50,000 visitors in its first three days

Three layers in six tiles: a reconstruction that became a world model; the reinforced-concrete breakthrough of 1913; 133 Monuments of History — from Wawel and Jasna Góra to the Augustów Canal; and the contemporary awards that after

2015 brought Polish studios into the first league of European architecture. The Szczecin Philharmonic remains the only Polish winner of the Mies van der Rohe Award, but Polish projects have been nominated continuously since 1996.

SOURCES

1. UNESCO World Heritage Centre — Historic Centre of Warsaw; Centennial Hall in Wrocław <<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/30/>> (2026)
2. EUMies Awards — Chronicle from Europe: Poland in the EU Prize for Contemporary Architecture (Fundacja Mies van der Rohe) <<https://eumiesawards.com/architecture-emerging/chronicle-from-europe-poland-in-the-european-union-prize-for-contemporary-architecture-mies-van-der-rohe-awards/>> (2026-05)
3. Wikipedia (EN) — World Architecture Festival (laureaci WBOTY); European Museum of the Year Award <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Architecture_Festival> (2026)
4. Narodowy Instytut Dziedzictwa — Pomniki historii (aktualna lista: 133 zabytki) <<https://nid.pl/pomniki-historii/>> (2026-08)

WAF 2016 and museum-award winners per encyclopaedic compilations (the organisers publish no stable archives). A correction to the common version: WAF 2016 was won by the Dialogue Centre Przełomy, not "Konieczny's Ark".

CHAPTER 11

Cuisine: from pierogi to 58 billion euros

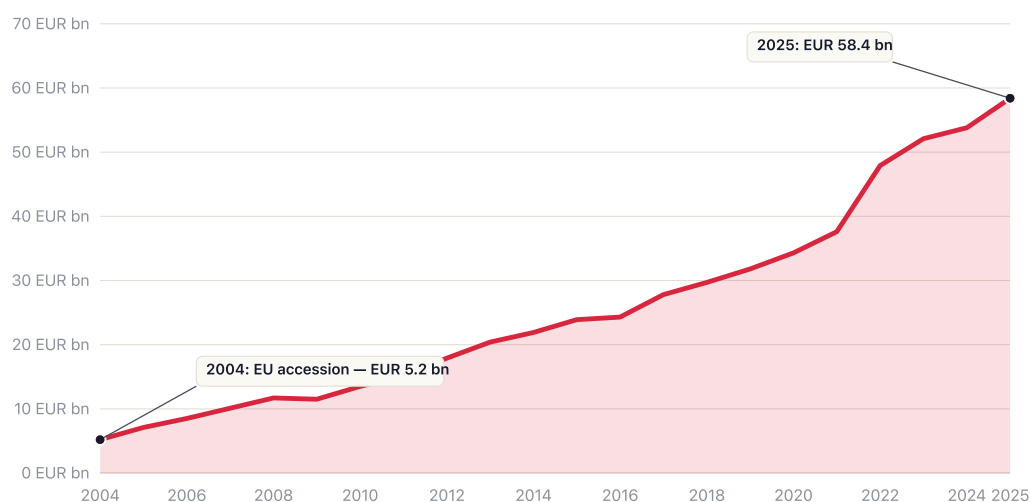
Food exports have grown elevenfold since EU accession, every third apple and every fifth chicken in the Union come from Poland, and Polish cuisine is in the world's top fifteen according to TasteAtlas. The table has its dark sides too: overweight above the EU average, a food share of spending half as high again, organic farming at the tail end.

Polish cuisine and Polish food are two linked stories. The first is economic and spectacular: since 2004 agri-food exports have grown from EUR 5.2 bn to 58.4 bn, with a surplus of EUR 19.8 bn, and Poland is the EU leader in poultry, apples and mushrooms. The second is cultural and only gathering pace: 196 restaurants in the Michelin guide, 51 protected products in EU registers — from oscypek to the St Martin's croissant — and pierogi as the world's highest-rated Polish dish. The dark sides are shown alongside, by the same measure.

FIG. 11.1

From accession to a record: agri-food exports 2004–2025

Exports of agri-food products from Poland, EUR bn, 2004–2025



EUR 5.2 bn (2004) → EUR 58.4 bn (2025, +8.6% y/y): more than elevenfold; trade surplus EUR 19.8 bn

75% of sales go to the EU (EUR 43.9 bn); the largest buyer — Germany (EUR 14.8 bn)

The strongest single image of the whole topic: two decades of almost uninterrupted growth, one flat year (2009) and a jump in 2022 (inflation and the redirection of trade after Russia's attack on Ukraine). Food is one of the few sectors of the Polish economy with a lasting, large trade surplus.

Every fifth chicken in the Union (20.5% of production, 2.9 m tonnes — more than Spain and France together) and almost every third apple (29.4% of the EU harvest) come from Poland; Poland is also the world's largest exporter of fresh mushrooms (255,000 tonnes, USD 650 m in 2024).

SOURCES

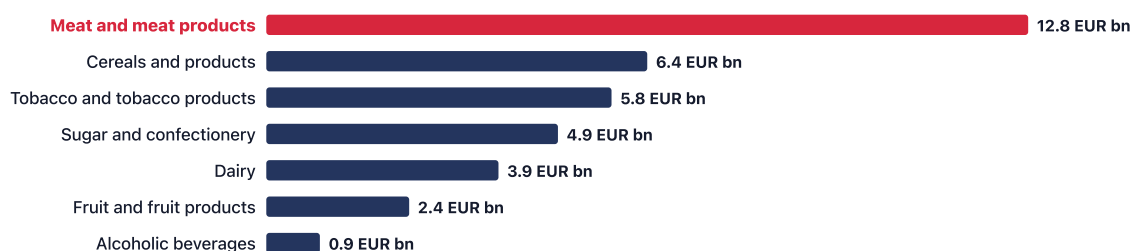
1. KOWR / Ministerstwo Rolnictwa i Rozwoju Wsi — Rekordowy eksport artykułów rolno-spożywczych z Polski w 2025 r. (dane GUS) <<https://www.gov.pl/attachment/6742a749-70a9-4bab-9c2b-c31dd618593b>> (2026)

Intermediate values read from the chart in the KOWR report ($\pm$ EUR 0.1 bn); the end values are stated in the report's text.

FIG. 11.2

What Poland sells the world to eat: export structure 2025

Agri-food exports by product group, EUR bn, 2025



Meat and meat products EUR 12.8 bn (22%), cereals 6.4, tobacco 5.8, sugar and confectionery 4.9, dairy 3.9, fruit 2.4, alcoholic beverages 0.9

Fastest growing: fruit (+16%) and dairy (+10%); alcohol the only decline (-2%)

Meat — above all poultry (poultry-meat exports alone are about EUR 6.7 bn) — is the largest group, and tobacco ranks surprisingly high: Poland is one of the EU's largest cigarette producers. Confectionery, dairy and fruit make

up the rest — the part of the economy that is both export and brand: Grójec apples, oscypek cheese and the St Martin's croissant carry EU name protection.

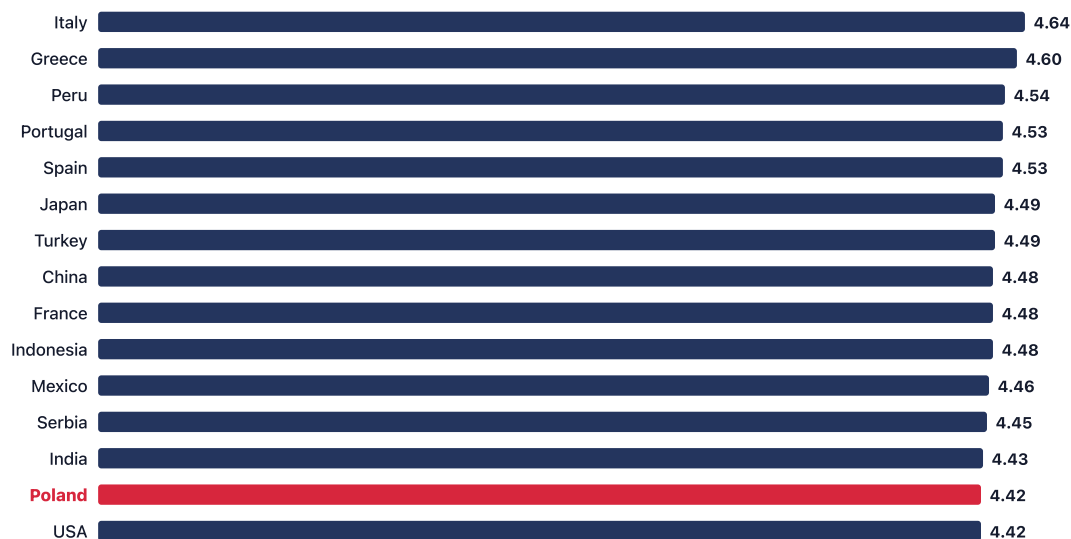
SOURCES

1. KOWR — Rekordowy eksport artykułów rolno-spożywczych z Polski w 2025 r. <<https://www.gov.pl/attachment/6742a749-70a9-4bab-9c2b-c31dd618593b>> (2026)
2. Eurostat, Statistics Explained — Agricultural production: livestock and meat; crops (drób 20,5%, jabłka 29,4%) <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Agricultural_production_-_crops> (2025)

FIG. 11.3

Pierogi on top: Polish cuisine in the world's top fifteen

TasteAtlas Awards 25/26 — best cuisines in the world, average user rating (1–5), top fifteen



TasteAtlas Awards 25/26: Polish cuisine 14th in the world (rating 4.42), above American, Korean and Thai; 11th in the previous edition

Highest-rated Polish dishes: pierogi 4.4; pączki, sernik, żurek, boletus soup 4.3; rosół, potato pancakes, zapiekanka 4.2

Honestly about the method: TasteAtlas measures affection and recognition, not quality, and changes every edition. But 14th in the world, ahead of American, Korean and Thai cuisine, shows the brand's reach: pierogi, żurek and

pączki are recognised far beyond Poland. Bigos — the national dish — does not make the top ten Polish dishes; Polish cuisine is rated highest by Poles, the Dutch, Germans and Swedes.

SOURCES

1. [TasteAtlas Awards 25/26 — 100 Best Cuisines in the World](https://www.tasteatlas.com/best/cuisines) <<https://www.tasteatlas.com/best/cuisines>> (2026)
2. [TasteAtlas — profil kuchni polskiej \(oceny potraw\)](https://www.tasteatlas.com/poland) <<https://www.tasteatlas.com/poland>> (2026-08)

A ranking based on user ratings (over 590,000 ratings of about 19,000 dishes), not on statistical methodology — a measure of affection and recognition, not quality.

FIG. 11.4

The taste of Poland in six numbers

Restaurants, protected products, production leaders, trade

196

restaurants in the MICHELIN Guide 2026

11 stars, 1 × two stars, 38 Bib Gourmand

51

protected products in EU registers

protected designations of origin, geographical indications and traditional specialities

29.4%

of apples harvested in the EU come from Poland

about 3.4 m tonnes (2024); 32% of EU apple orchards

20.5%

of EU poultry production — 1st place

2.9 m tonnes; more than Spain and France together

no. 1

in the world for fresh mushroom exports

255,000 tonnes, USD 650 m (2024)

13,159

Żabka stores (July 2026)

incl. 276 Frooti stores in Romania — a Polish retail format abroad

MICHELIN Guide Poland 2026: 196 restaurants, 11 with stars (the only two-star — Bottiglieria 1881 in Kraków, for the fourth year running), 38 Bib Gourmand; stars in Warsaw, Kraków, Wrocław, Poznań, Gdańsk, Kościelisko and Pszczyna

51 products in EU quality registers (PDO, PGI, TSG) — incl. oscypek, bryndza podhalańska, the Kraków obwarzanek, the St Martin's croissant, Grójec apples, Zator carp, Polish Vodka

The cultural side of the cuisine is only gathering pace — the Michelin guide covered Poland fully from 2023, and the number of stars grows with each edition — but the production side is already a powerhouse: the Union's leader in poultry and

apples, the world leader in fresh mushrooms, the EU's carp capital. Żabka, Poland's largest retail chain, is one of the few Polish retail formats exported abroad.

SOURCES

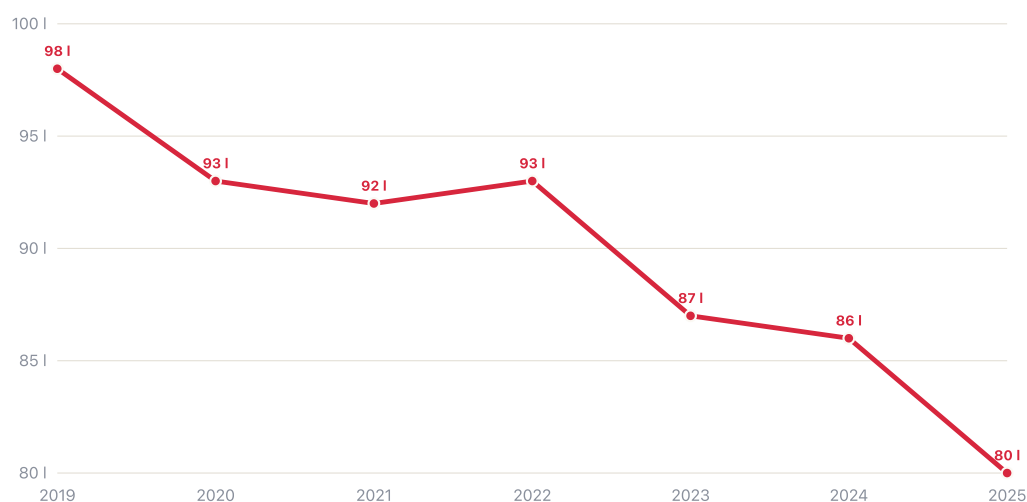
1. Michelin — The MICHELIN Guide Poland 2026 <<https://www.michelin.com/en/publications/products-and-services/the-michelin-guide-poland-2026/>> (2026)
2. Ministerstwo Rolnictwa i Rozwoju Wsi — produkty zarejestrowane jako ChNP, ChOG oraz GTS <<https://www.gov.pl/web/rolnictwo/produkty-zarejestrowane-jako-chronione-nazwy-pochodzenia-chronione-oznaczenia-geograficzne-oraz-gwarantowane-tradycyjne-specjalnosci>> (2026-08)
3. Eurostat, Statistics Explained — Agricultural production: crops; livestock and meat <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Agricultural_production_-_crops> (2025)
4. World Bank WITS / UN Comtrade — Poland exports of mushrooms, fresh or chilled (HS 0709.51), 2024 <<https://wits.worldbank.org/trade/comtrade/en/country/POL/year/2024/tradeflow/Exports/partner/WLD/product/070951>> (2025)
5. Żabka Group — relacje inwestorskie (liczba sklepów) <<https://zabkagroup.com/investors/>> (2026-08)

The ministry's list (updated 6 August 2026) has exactly 51 names; spirits (Polish Vodka) are kept in a separate EU register.

FIG. 11.5

Not every trend rises: beer loses 3 litres a year

Beer consumption per inhabitant, litres a year, Poland, 2019–2025



Consumption per inhabitant: 98 l (2019) → 80 l (2025) — the fastest fall among large EU markets; Czechia 121 l, Germany 84 l

Production 40.4 → 33.1 m hl (–18% in six years); Poland still the EU's 3rd-largest beer producer after Germany and Spain; 330 active breweries

For years a Polish statistical pride — today a calm note that not every trend rises. Poland was in the EU's top three for beer consumption; today it is off the podium and falling fastest of all the large markets: –18 litres per person in six years. It is a

generational change, not a blip: younger consumers drink less alcohol (total consumption has fallen to 8.8 l of pure alcohol — the third year of decline), and the craft-beer boom of 2015–2019 has stalled.

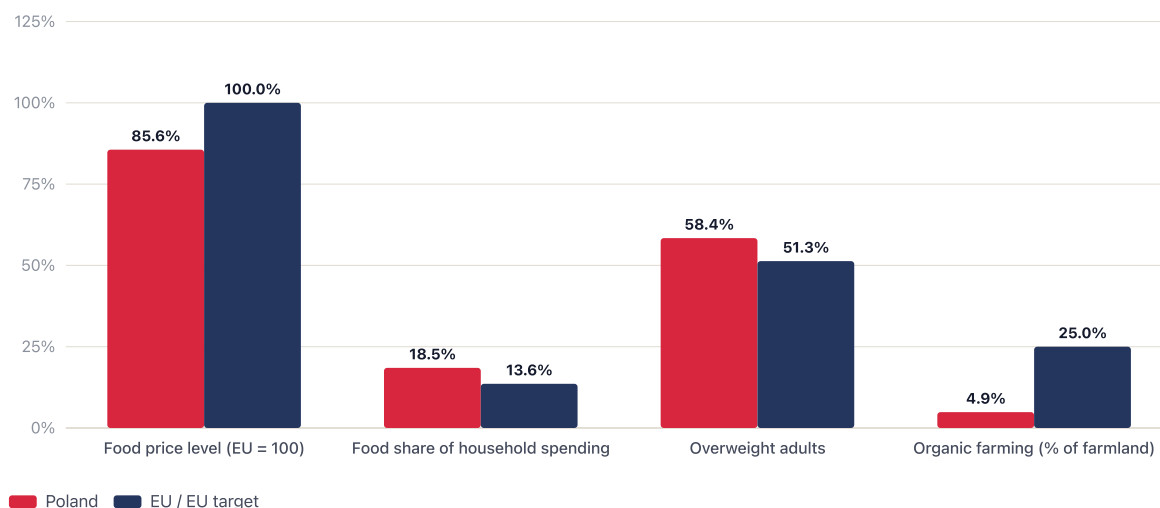
SOURCES

1. [The Brewers of Europe — European Beer Trends 2026](https://brewersofeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/beer-trends-2026-web-20260708.pdf) (https://brewersofeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/beer-trends-2026-web-20260708.pdf) (2026-07)
2. [Krajowe Centrum Przeciwdziałania Uzależnieniom — Spożycie napojów alkoholowych w 2024 r. \(8,8 l czystego alkoholu na osobę\)](https://kcpu.gov.pl/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Spozycie-napojow-alkoholowych2024.pdf) (https://kcpu.gov.pl/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Spozycie-napojow-alkoholowych2024.pdf) (2025-09)

FIG. 11.6

The bright and dark side of the table: prices, spending, overweight, organics

Four indicators, Poland vs the EU (or the EU target), % — different measures on one board



Food 14% cheaper than the EU average (PLI 85.6) — but food takes 18.5% of the household budget against 13.6% in the EU

58.4% of adults overweight (EU 51.3%), 18.6% obese; organic farming 4.88% of farmland against the EU target of 25% by 2030

Cheap food has to be read together with the spending share: prices are low in absolute terms, but relative to income food in Poland takes a third more of the budget than the EU average. The darkest side of the Polish table is overweight

— seven points above the EU average — and a rare case of regression is organic farming, whose share fell for almost a decade after 2013 and is only now rebounding.

SOURCES

1. Eurostat, prc_ppp_ind — price level index, food (2024) <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/prc_ppp_ind/default/table?lang=en> (2025)
2. Eurostat, nama_10_co3_p3 — household final consumption by COICOP (żywność i napoje bezalkoholowe, 2022) <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/nama_10_co3_p3/default/table?lang=en> (2025)
3. Eurostat, sdg_02_10 — obesity rate by body mass index (EU-SILC 2022) <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/sdg_02_10/default/table?lang=en> (2025)
4. Eurostat, sdg_02_40 — area under organic farming (2024); cel strategii „Od pola do stołu”: 25% w 2030 r. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/sdg_02_40/default/table?lang=en> (2025)

The last EU bar is the EU target (25%), not an average. Obesity 18.6% — flagged by Eurostat as low reliability.

CHAPTER 12

An oasis of calm: safety and wellbeing

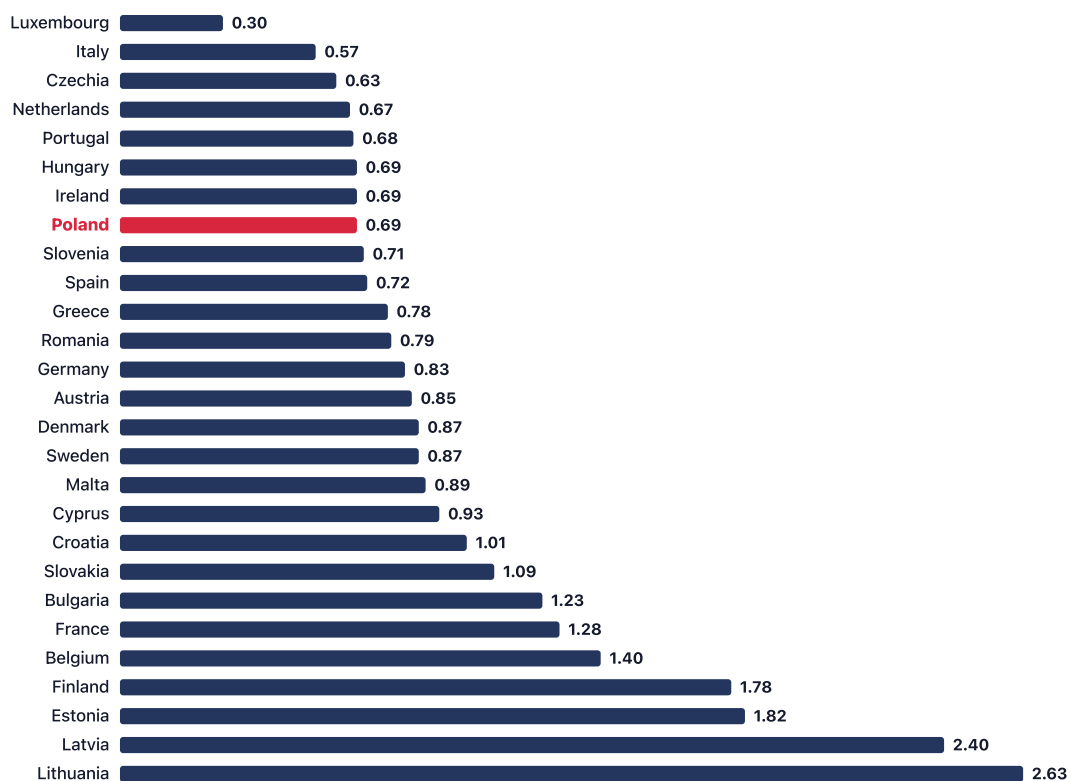
A homicide rate seven times lower than in the USA, the biggest climb in the 2026 Global Peace Index, 24th in the happiness ranking — and three years of life fewer than the average European.

Against the world, Poland is calm on a scale a chart struggles to hold: Poles report crime in their neighbourhood far less often than the average European, and 89% consider the country safe. In the happiness ranking Poland climbed 24 places in four years. The dark sides of this chapter are not perceptions but deaths: shorter life expectancy, male suicide six times as frequent as female, smog still 1.7 times the EU average — each of these indicators is improving, none is yet good.

FIG. 12.1

The safest part of Europe: homicides per 100,000 inhabitants

Police-recorded intentional homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, 2024, EU countries
(lower = safer)



Poland 0.69 (2024) — lower than Germany (0.83), Sweden (0.87), France (1.28), Belgium (1.40), Finland (1.78)

USA: 5.76; world: 5.2 (2023) — Poland about seven times below both

Only 2.8% of Poles report crime, violence or vandalism in their area (EU: 10.0%); 89% consider Poland a safe country (CBOS 2026)

Poland is not merely safe — it is safe on a scale the chart cannot hold: the homicide rate is seven times lower than in the United States and six times lower than the world average, and within the Union lower than in Germany, France, Sweden or Belgium. The share of people who see their neighbourhood as affected by crime has

halved since 2015 and is the third-lowest in Europe.

A hard rebuttal of any “dangerous Poland” narrative: safety here is at once a police statistic, a survey finding and the everyday experience of the 96% of residents who call their neighbourhood calm.

SOURCES

1. Eurostat, crim_off_cat — recorded offences by offence category (ICCS0101 intentional homicide, per 100 000) <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/crim_off_cat/default/table> (2026-04)
2. Bank Światowy / UNODC — intentional homicides (per 100,000 people), VC.IHR.PSRC.P5 (Polska, USA, świat) <<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/VC.IHR.PSRC.P5?locations=PL-US-1W>> (2026-07)

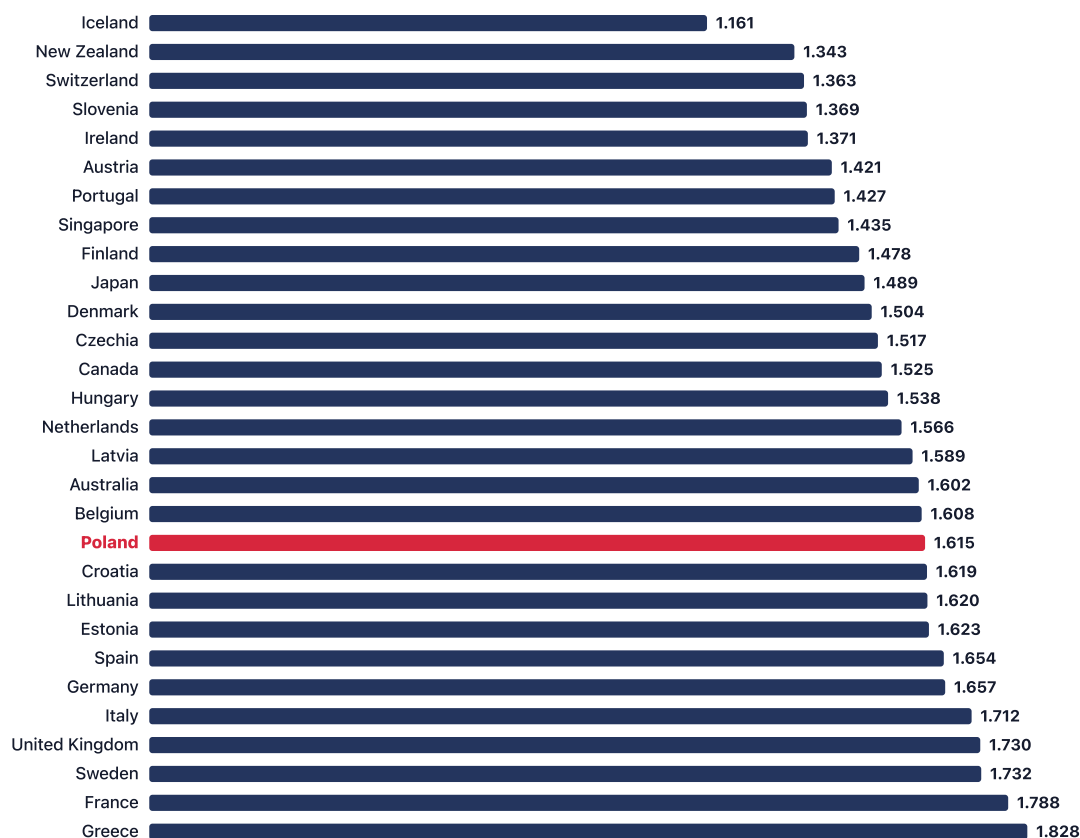
3. Eurostat, [ilc_mddw03 — crime, violence or vandalism in the area \(EU-SILC\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_mddw03/default/table) <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_mddw03/default/table> (2026-04)
4. CBOS — trend „Poczucie bezpieczeństwa” (IV 2026: 89% uznaje Polskę za kraj bezpieczny) <https://www.cbos.pl/PL/trendy/trendy.php?trend_parametr=poczucie_bezpieczenstwa> (2026-04)

The USA (5.76) and the world average (5.2) lie far off the chart's scale — the US bar would be eight times longer than Poland's.

FIG. 12.2

The biggest climb in the world: Poland 22nd in the Global Peace Index 2026

Global Peace Index 2026, score (lower = more peaceful), selected countries in Europe and the world



2025: 45th → 2026: 22nd of 163 countries; score improved 9.1% — the largest gain of any state

Components: internal safety +9.6%, ongoing conflict +17.5%; militarisation -3.6% (arms imports)

The strongest argument that the dark sides (chapter 13) are not a catastrophe: in 2026 Poland posted the biggest score improvement of the 163 countries and jumped from 45th to 22nd, ahead of Spain, Germany, Italy, the UK, Sweden and France. The IEP attributes the climb to

political stabilisation after 2023, the fading of violent demonstrations and better internal safety.

The only component that worsened was militarisation — the effect of record defence spending and arms imports (chapter 15). In a peace ranking you pay points for that; in a ranking of state security, not necessarily.

SOURCES

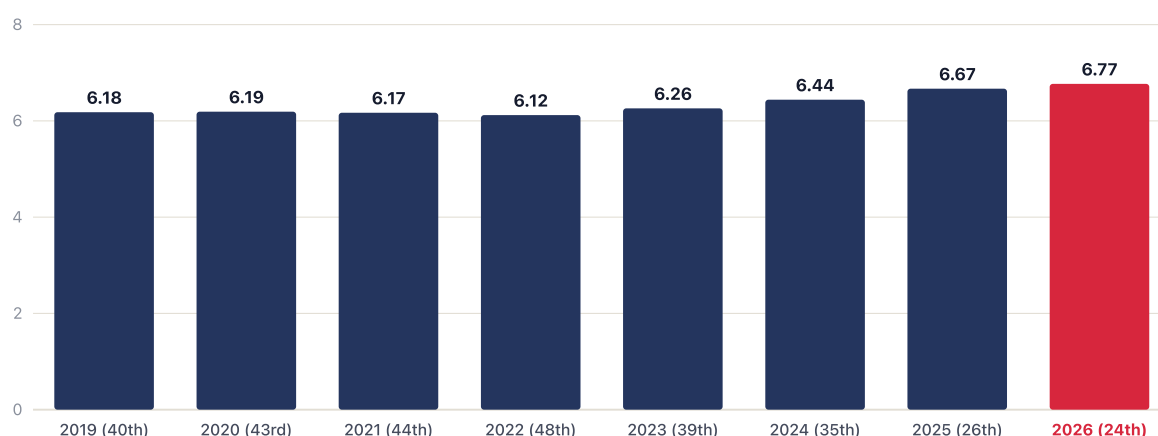
1. Institute for Economics and Peace — Global Peace Index 2026 Report (tabela rankingowa; rozdział o największych poprawach) <<https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Global-Peace-Index-2026-Report.pdf>> (2026-06)

Romania's 1.788 in the IEP table coincides with France's value; the chart shows France. Ukraine: 3.184 (160th); Russia: last place.

FIG. 12.3

Up 24 places in four years: Poland in the World Happiness Report

Average life evaluation (0–10) and Poland's rank in successive editions of the World Happiness Report, 2019–2026



2022 report: 48th (6.12 points) → 2026 report: 24th (6.77 points) — the highest ever, just behind the USA (23rd), ahead of Canada and the UK

Life evaluation on a 0–10 scale, three-year average (Gallup World Poll)

Poland climbed 24 places in four years — the fastest in Central Europe — and for the first time sits ahead of the UK and Canada. The rise is not an artefact of one edition: life evaluation has risen continuously since the 2022 report.

Curiously, over the same period interpersonal trust and trust in political institutions (chapter 13) did not move or fell. Poles are ever more satisfied with their own lives and ever less trusting of others — a tension that runs through this whole portrait.

SOURCES

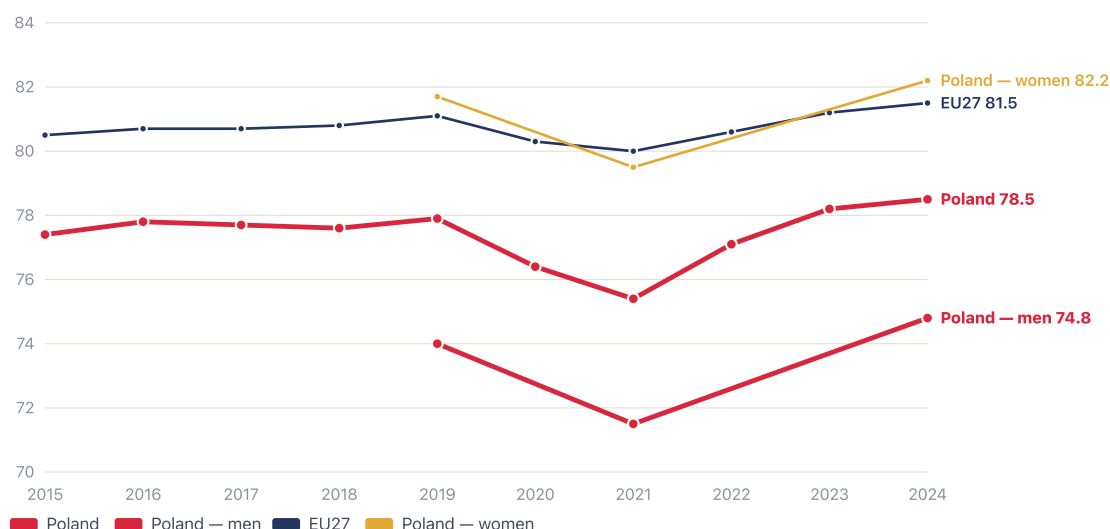
1. World Happiness Report 2026 (Gallup / Oxford Wellbeing Research Centre) — pełny ranking krajów (omówienie Happier Lives Institute) <<https://www.happierlivesinstitute.org/2026/03/19/world-happiness-report-2026-full-country-rankings-our-favourite-finding/>> (2026-03)
2. [countryeconomy.com](https://countryeconomy.com/demography/world-happiness-index/poland) — World Happiness Index, Poland (seria historyczna rankingów 2019–2025) <<https://countryeconomy.com/demography/world-happiness-index/poland>> (2026)

Year = year of the report's publication; historical values from an aggregator (the WHR report confirmed for the 2026 edition).

FIG. 12.4

The pandemic dip and a three-year gap: life expectancy, Poland vs the EU

Life expectancy at birth, years, 2015–2024



2024: Poland 78.5 years (men 74.8; women 82.2) vs EU 81.5 — a 3.0-year gap, 4.1 years for men

Pandemic (2021): Poland –2.5 years against 2019, EU –1.1; the pre-pandemic record was beaten in 2024

Healthy life years: Poland 64.7 vs EU 65.2 (2024) — practically at the average

Poland lost more than twice as many years of life in the pandemic as the average EU country, but recovered faster than expected: in 2024 life expectancy exceeded its 2019 level. The three-year gap to the Union has not vanished, and its whole substance is in practice men's health: women in Poland live almost as long as in the EU; men four years less.

Contrary to the popular image, healthy life years in Poland are practically at the EU average (64.7 vs 65.2), and since 2022 Poland has gained 2.3 years here — more than the Union. The hardest weakness lies elsewhere: treatable mortality is 53% above the EU average (132.7 vs 86.8 per 100,000). That is not perception, it is deaths.

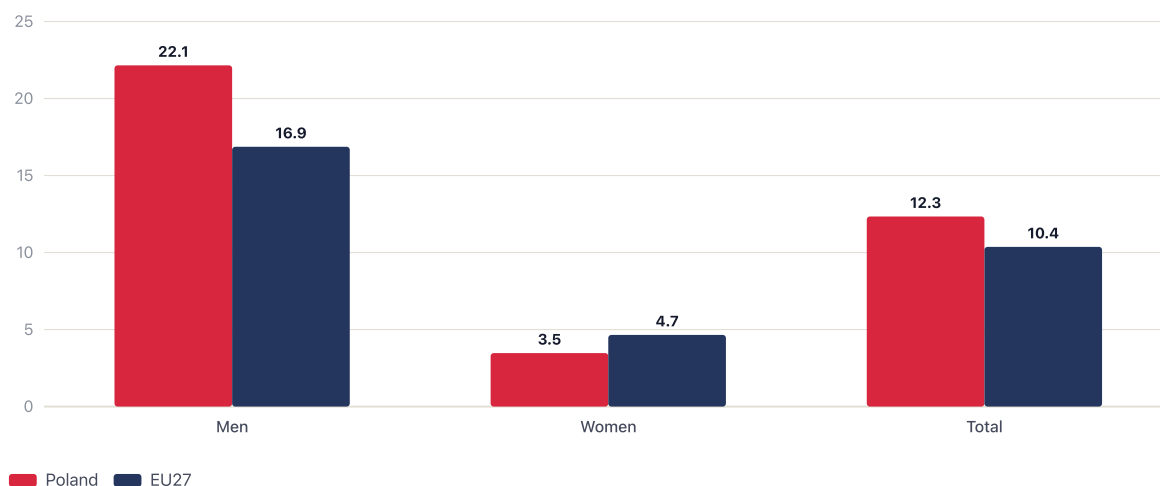
SOURCES

1. Eurostat, [demo_mlexpec](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_mlexpec/default/table) — life expectancy by age and sex (2026-06)
2. Eurostat, [hlth_hlye](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/hlth_hlye/default/table) — healthy life years by sex (2026-07)

FIG. 12.5

A portrait of men's health: suicide 6.4 times as frequent as among women

Standardised suicide death rate per 100,000 inhabitants, 2023



Poland 2023: men 22.15, women 3.47 per 100,000 (ratio 6.4:1); EU: 16.87 and 4.65 (3.6:1)

Overall: Poland 12.34 vs EU 10.37 — 19% above the average; the male rate has not moved in a decade

One of the heaviest indicators in the whole set: Poland is a fifth above the EU average, and the gulf between men and women is among the widest in the Union and has not narrowed in a decade. Polish women take their own lives less often than the average European woman; Polish

men — far more often than the average European man.

One sign of improvement against this backdrop: alcohol consumption fell for the third year running, to 8.8 litres of pure alcohol per person (2024) — from a record of about 9.8 l in 2019.

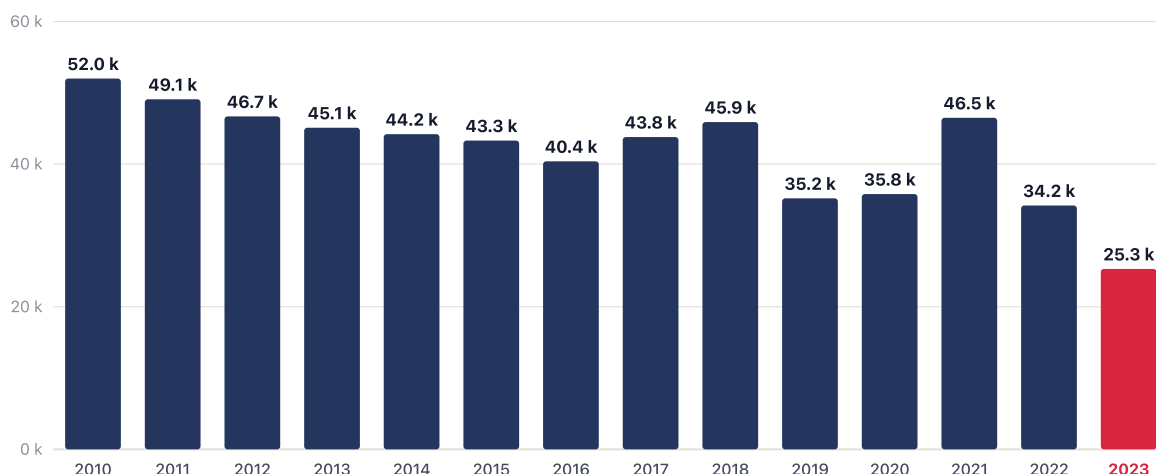
SOURCES

1. Eurostat, hlth_cd_asdr2 — causes of death, standardised death rate (ICD-10 X60–X84, Y87.0) <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/hlth_cd_asdr2/default/table> (2026-06)
2. Krajowe Centrum Przeciwdziałania Uzależnieniom — Spożycie napojów alkoholowych w 2024 r. (8,8 l czystego alkoholu na osobę, trzeci rok spadku) <<https://kcpu.gov.pl/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Spozycie-napojow-alkoholowych2024.pdf>> (2025-09)

FIG. 12.6

Smog is genuinely retreating: half as many premature deaths from PM2.5

Premature deaths attributed to exposure to fine particulate matter (PM2.5) in Poland, thousands, 2010–2023 (EEA)



2010: 51,987 deaths (137 per 100,000) → 2023: 25,268 (69 per 100,000); EU 2023: 41 per 100,000

Poland still 1.7 times the EU average and second in the Union in absolute numbers (after Italy)

Polish smog — for years among the worst in Europe — is genuinely retreating: premature deaths attributed to particulates have more than halved since 2010, and the rate per 100,000 inhabitants has fallen from 137 to 69. Boiler-replacement programmes, mild winters and

cheaper renewable power (chapter 15) all contribute.

Honestly: Poland is still 1.7 times the EU average and — despite a much smaller population than Germany — second in the Union in absolute numbers. The improvement is real; the problem is not solved.

SOURCES

1. Eurostat / EEA, sdg_11_52 — premature deaths due to exposure to fine particulate matter (PM2.5) <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/sdg_11_52/default/table> (2025-12)

The 2022→2023 drop partly reflects a change in the EEA's estimation method; the long-run trend is reliable, a single year should be read with care.

CHAPTER 13

Shadows: xenophobia, disinformation, polarisation

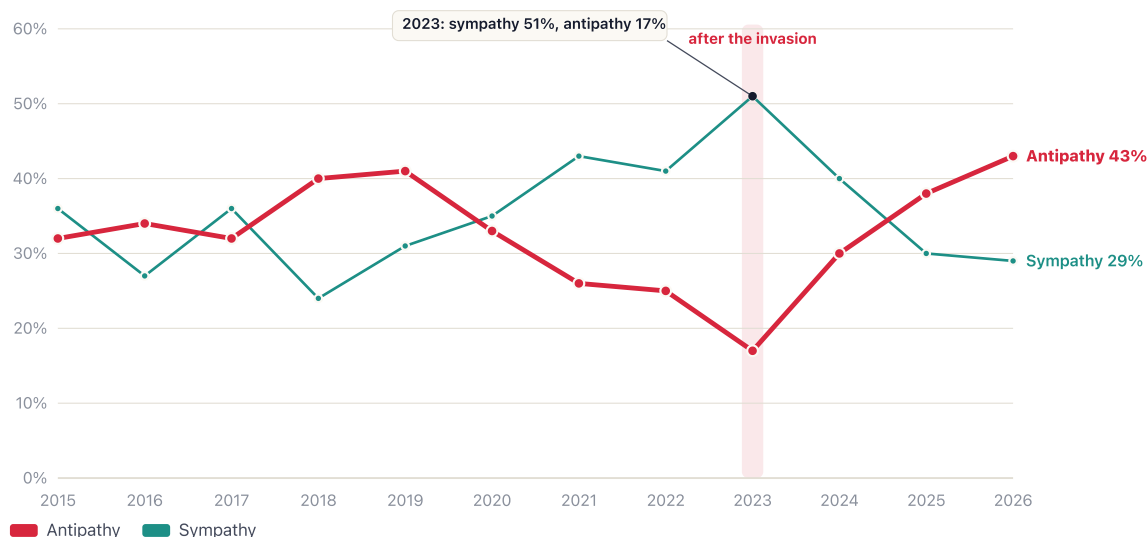
Sympathy for Ukrainians fell from 51% to 29% in three years, only 22% of Poles think most people can be trusted, and one in five trusts political parties. At the same time press freedom rebounded from 66th to 27th, and Poland sits mid-table in Europe for resilience to disinformation. The problems are real and measurable — not catastrophic.

This chapter measures what is hardest to admit in a self-portrait. Poland today has two diverging profiles: security institutions and international standing are improving (chapter 12), while social ties and attitudes to outsiders are deteriorating. We show this without dramatising — in a CBOS series reaching back to 1993, in European comparisons of trust and resilience to disinformation, in press-freedom and corruption rankings — and close with an open question in which Poles themselves name quarrelsomeness and polarisation as the second reason for shame.

FIG. 13.1

A reversal in three years: Poles' sympathy and antipathy towards Ukrainians

Share of Poles declaring sympathy and antipathy towards Ukrainians, %, CBOS, measured in January/February, 2015–2026



Peak sympathy: 51% in 2023 with 17% antipathy; 2026: sympathy 29%, antipathy 43%

Antipathy has exceeded its pre-full-scale-invasion level (40% in 2018, 41% in 2019)

55% of Poles have Ukrainians in at least one social role; only 10% have no contact with working Ukrainians

The sharpest turn in the whole CBOS series: in three years sympathy for Ukrainians fell 22 points and antipathy rose 26, exceeding its pre-war level. The lines crossed in 2024 and keep diverging.

A counterpoint, so as not to dramatise: declared antipathy is rising alongside rising real contact, not in a vacuum. More than half of Poles know Ukrainians personally — as neighbours, colleagues, friends — and 27% deal with them daily. This is tension within coexistence, not rejection of an unknown group.

SOURCES

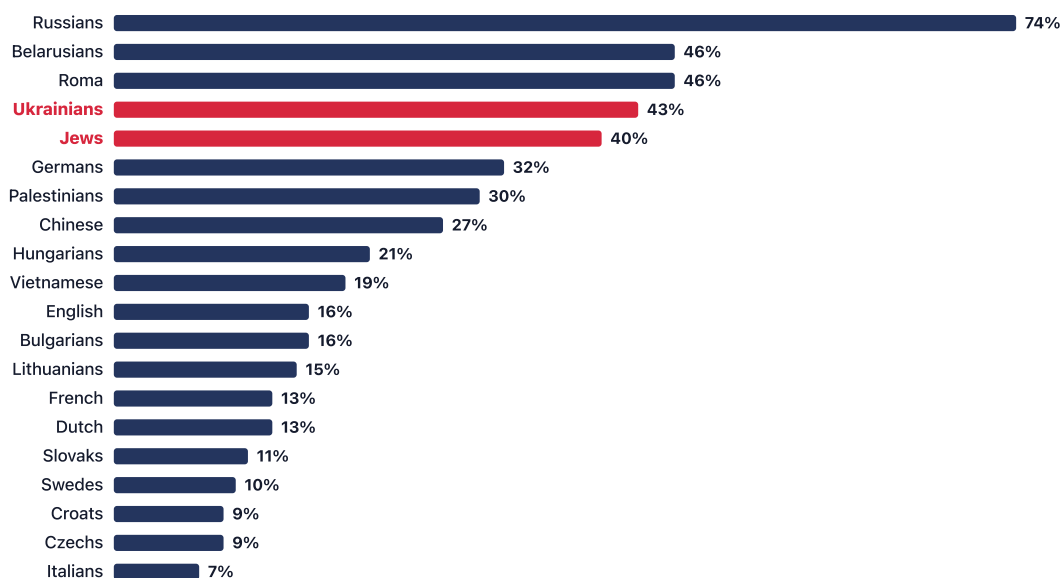
1. CBOS, Komunikat z badań nr 16/2026 „Stosunek Polaków do innych narodów”, tabele 1 i 2 <https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKO M.POL/2026/K_016_26.PDF> (2026-02)
2. CBOS, Komunikat z badań nr 87/2026 „Kontakty Polaków z Ukraińcami i społeczny dystans wobec nich” <<https://www.cbos.pl/PL/publikacje/clear.php>> (2026-07)

The measurement labelled 2022 was taken in January — BEFORE the full-scale invasion of 24 February 2022; its effect shows only in 2023.

FIG. 13.2

Antipathy is directional, not general: attitudes to 20 nations

Share of Poles declaring antipathy towards a given nation or group, %, CBOS, January 2026



Most antipathy: Russians 74%, Belarusians 46%, Roma 46%, Ukrainians 43%, Jews 40%

Most sympathy: Italians 58%, Czechs 55%, Slovaks 52%, English 49%, Americans 47%

Antipathy towards Jews: 40% — the highest since 2004 (up 8 points in a year)

Xenophobia in Poland is not uniform. Towards most nations of Western and Central Europe one in ten Poles or fewer declares antipathy; the spike concerns a few specific groups — Russians (since 2022), Ukrainians and Belarusians (since 2024), and Jews, towards whom antipathy rose 8

points in a single year to the highest level in two decades.

For the third year running attitudes towards the nations that gained after the war broke out — Americans and the English — are also worsening. It is a chapter in which the data allow no comfortable generalisation in either direction.

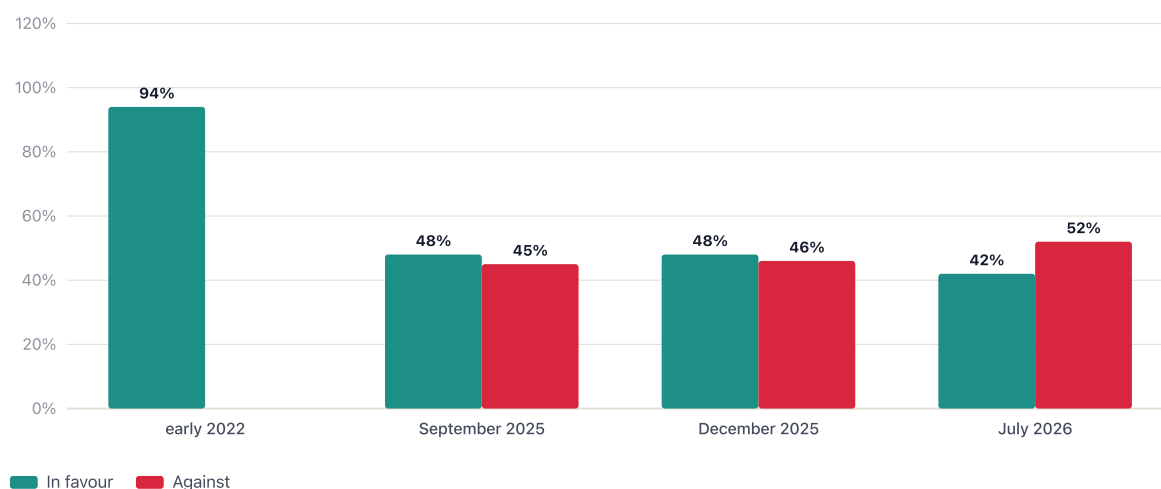
SOURCES

1. CBOS, Komunikat z badań nr 16/2026 „Stosunek Polaków do innych narodów”, tabela 2 (badanie 8–20 stycznia 2026, N=938) <https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2026/K_016_26.PDF> (2026-02)

FIG. 13.3

From 94% to 42%: support for taking in refugees from Ukraine

"Should Poland take in Ukrainian refugees from conflict areas?", %, CBOS



Early 2022: 94% in favour; July 2026: 42% in favour, 52% against — opponents outnumber supporters for the first time

54% consider the aid to refugees too large; attitudes are not uniform: 87% support limiting medical benefits, but 58% oppose taking accommodation away from mothers with children

The strongest single number of the chapter: support down from 94% to 42% in four years. In July 2026, for the first time in CBOS's measurements, opponents of taking in refugees outnumbered supporters.

A nuance from the same survey: attitudes are not uniformly hard. A majority supports limiting benefits, but a majority opposes taking the roof from over the heads of mothers with children. Poland still hosts about 950,000 people under temporary protection — second in the EU after Germany (chapter 15).

SOURCES

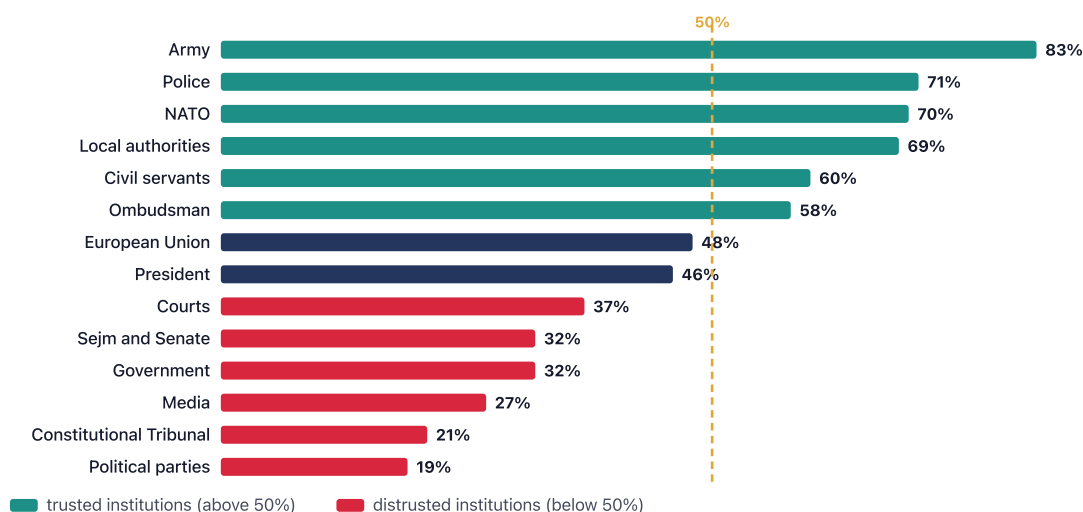
1. CBOS, Komunikat z badań nr 74/2026 „Polacy o ograniczeniu pomocy dla uchodźców z Ukrainy” (badanie 2–12 lipca 2026, N=938) <https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2026/K_074_26.PDF> (2026-07)

For the early-2022 measurement CBOS reports only the share in favour (94%).

FIG. 13.4

Whom Poles trust: the army 83%, political parties 19%

Share declaring trust in public institutions, %, CBOS, February 2026



Changes 2024→2026: government –11 pts, NATO –11, Sejm and Senate –9, EU –7, media –7; the only rise — the president (+6)

The average Pole trusts 6.6 of 14 institutions surveyed (2024: 7.2)

The dividing line runs exactly through the middle of the chart: uniformed and local institutions enjoy trust, political and judicial ones do not. Four in five Poles trust the army, one in five trusts political parties; 70% declare distrust of parties, 61% of the government.

This is the measurable face of polarisation: the political dispute dents trust in every institution that takes part in it (government, parliament, courts, the Tribunal, media) and spares those standing outside it. After the 2023 election trust in government and parliament rose, only to return by 2026 to its pre-change level.

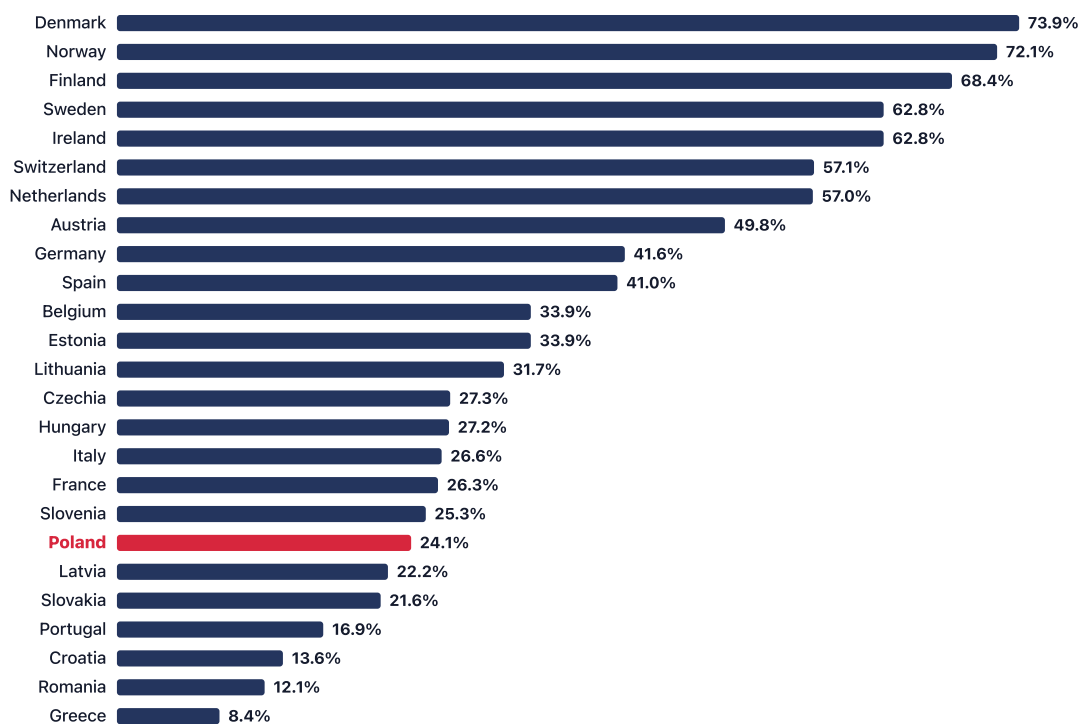
SOURCES

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FIG. 13.5

A flat line for 24 years: only 22% of Poles trust other people

Share who think most people can be trusted, %, World Values Survey (input data of the Media Literacy Index 2026)



CBOS 2026: "most people can be trusted" — 22%; "you have to be very careful" — 75%; a maximum of 26% in 2008–2010

World Values Survey: Poland 24.1% vs Denmark 73.9%, Germany 41.6%, Czechia 27.3%, Greece 8.4%

A flat line for 24 years says more than any spike: in successive CBOS measurements since 2002 the share who trust others has fluctuated between 17% and 26%, and in 2026 stands at 22%. It is a structural deficit of social capital, attributable to no particular government. The gap to Denmark is 50 percentage points.

This chart explains why Poland does not climb higher in rankings of resilience to disinformation despite good educational results — trust is the weakest component of its score. At the same time Poland is no European exception: Czechia, Italy and France trust little more, and Greece and Romania far less.

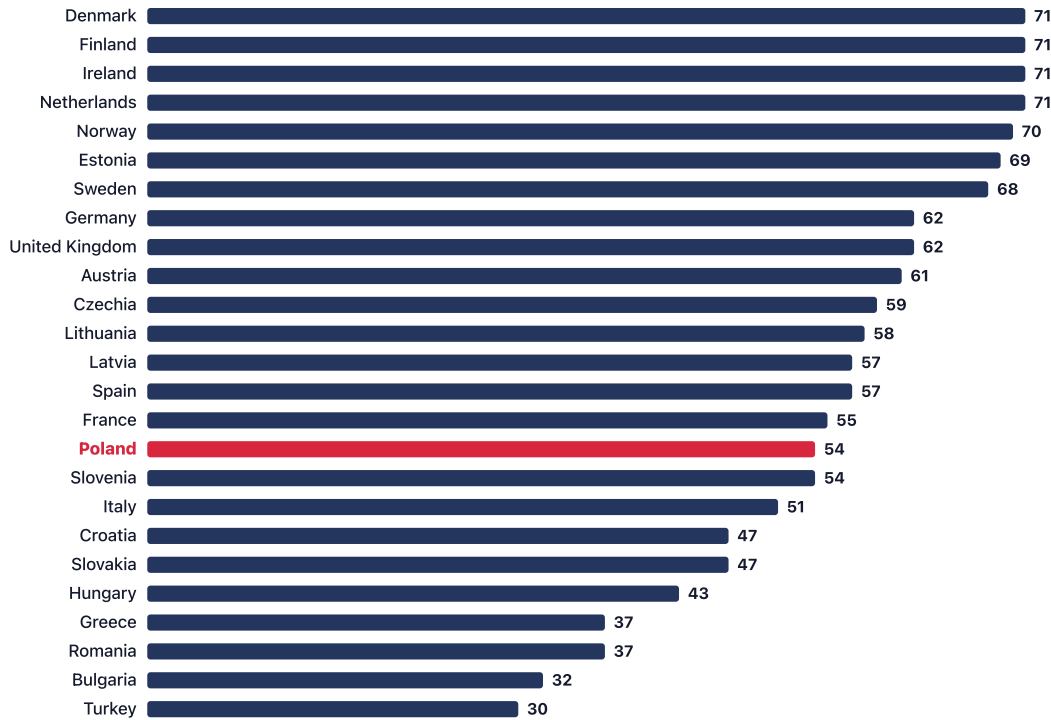
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FIG. 13.6

Resilience to disinformation: mid-table in Europe

Media Literacy Index 2026 (Open Society Institute Sofia), points 0–100, selected European countries



Media Literacy Index 2026: Poland 20th of 41 countries, 54 points out of 100 — up two places since 2023

Reuters Digital News Report 2026: trust in news 39% (–8 pts y/y), news avoidance 46%, paying for news 11%

77% of Poles often or sometimes get news about current events from social media; 27% trust the media

Poland is mid-table in Europe for resilience to disinformation: clearly above Hungary, Romania or Bulgaria, but 17 points behind the Scandinavian leaders. The components explain the structure: PISA results pull the index up (63–64 points), interpersonal trust (42) pulls it down.

The exposure channel is plain: three-quarters of Poles learn about current events from social platforms, trust in news fell 8 points in a year — one of the largest drops among the markets surveyed, which the Reuters Institute links to polarisation during the 2025 presidential election — and one in nine pays for news.

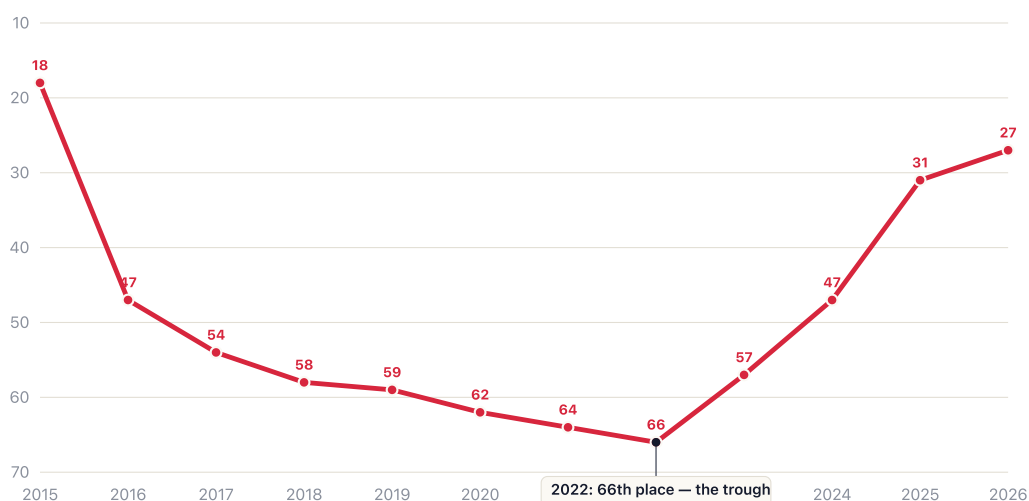
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FIG. 13.7

The fastest rebound in Europe: press freedom from 66th to 27th

Poland's position in the World Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders), 2015–2026 — higher on the chart = better



RSF World Press Freedom Index: 18th (2015) → 66th (2022) → 27th (2026) of 180 countries

Down 48 places in seven years, then up 39 places in four

The most dramatic curve in the whole material: a fall of 48 places in seven years, then the fastest improvement in this ranking anywhere in Europe. In 2026 Poland is 27th of 180 countries — higher than in any year since 2015.

The contrast with the next chart is instructive: press freedom rebounded spectacularly after the 2023 change of government; the perception of corruption — not at all.

SOURCES

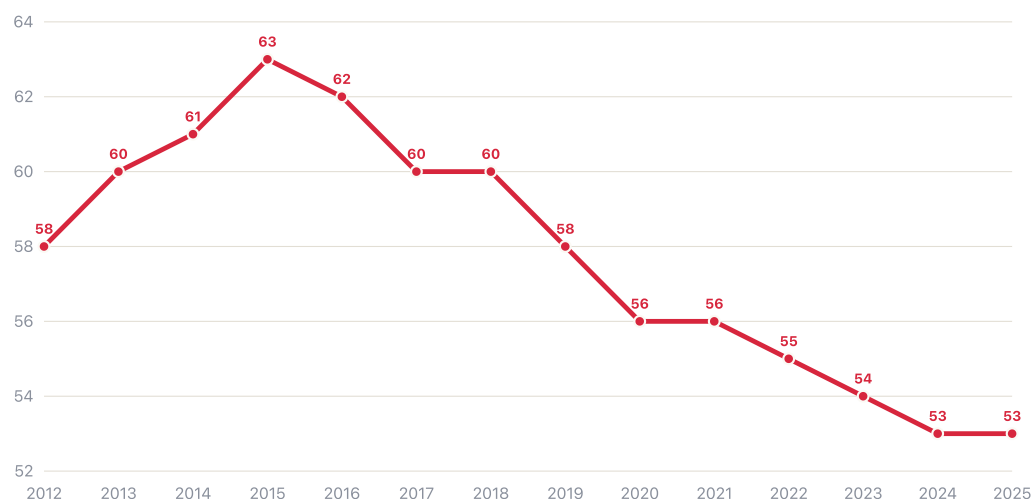
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RSF changed its methodology in 2022: positions are comparable, point scores before and after 2022 are not.

FIG. 13.8

This did not rebound: perceived corruption at its lowest in the series

Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International), points 0–100 (higher = less corruption), Poland, 2012–2025



Corruption Perceptions Index: 63 points (2015) → 53 (2024 and 2025); 52nd of 182 countries

WJP Rule of Law Index 2025: 0.66, 32nd of 143; Freedom House 2026: 82/100, status "free"

The hardest chart for an optimistic narrative: unlike press freedom, perceived corruption did not rebound after 2023 but settled at the bottom — ten points below the 2015 peak. The CPI measures the perceptions of experts and business, not the number of crimes, but it is

precisely that perception which builds a state's credibility.

In the rule-of-law index Poland is improving very slowly (+0.4% in a year) and remains in the bottom quarter of its region — clearly behind Czechia (0.74) and Lithuania (0.77), clearly ahead of Hungary (0.50).

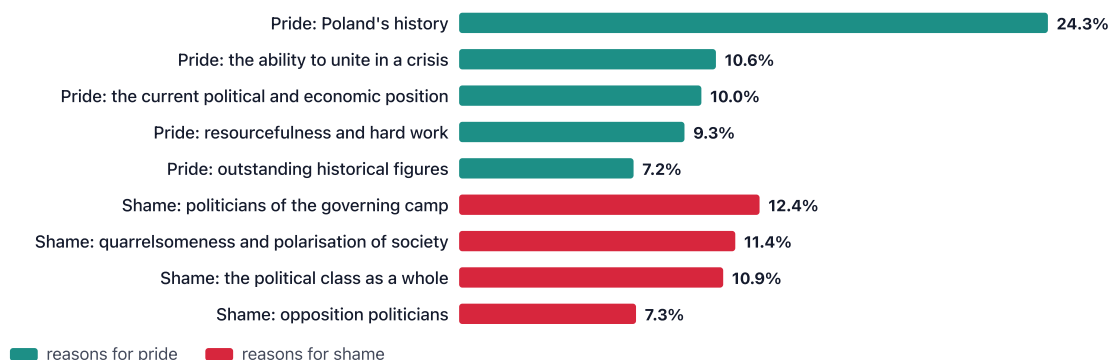
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FIG. 13.9

Self-portrait: what Poles are proud of and what they are ashamed of

Most frequent answers to the open questions "What can Poles be proud of?" and "What can they be ashamed of?", % of mentions, CBOS, May 2026



Open question, unprompted (CBOS, May 2026, N=1,041)

Pride: history (24%), the ability to unite in a crisis (11%), the country's current position (10%); shame: politicians (12%), quarrelsomeness and polarisation (11%), the political class as a whole (11%)

A perfect close to the chapter and a bracket for the whole title: asked without prompting, Poles themselves name quarrelsomeness and polarisation as the second-biggest reason for shame — and the ability to unite in a crisis as the second reason for pride. Three of the five most frequent reasons for shame concern politicians directly.

Polarisation also has its numbers from the ballot box: a record 74.4% turnout in the 2023 election and 71.6% in the second round of the 2025 presidential election, in which the country split almost exactly in half — 50.89% to 49.11%, 1.78 points out of nearly 21 million votes. High mobilisation is here at once the strength of democracy and the measure of division.

SOURCES

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Figures from CBOS's official abstract in its publications catalogue — to be confirmed against the full report before print.

CHAPTER 14

Inequality, housing, demography

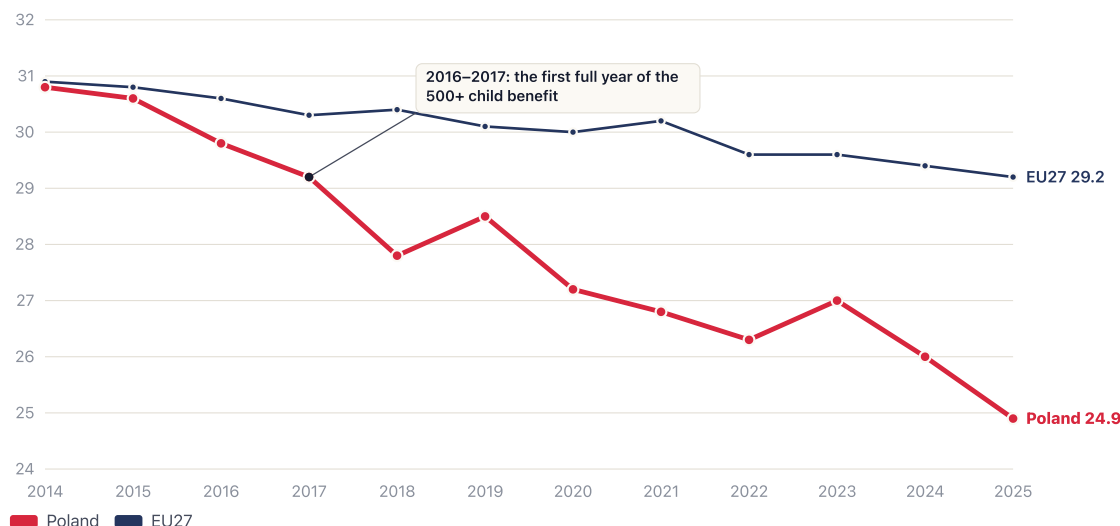
Income inequality is now among the lowest in the Union and the gender pay gap is a quarter of Germany's — but one in three Poles lives in an overcrowded home, Warsaw is three times richer than the Lublin region, and fertility has fallen to a record 1.14.

An important correction to the common claim of “rising inequality”: measured by income, inequality in Poland is among the lowest in the Union and has fallen continuously since 2015. The inequalities that are really growing or persisting have a different dimension — regional (Warsaw versus the east), housing (overcrowding twice as common as in the EU) and generational (pensions losing ground against wages). The biggest challenge is demography: Poland now has 40% fewer births than in 2017, and natural decrease is the highest since the war — quietly offset by immigration that the official population statistics do not yet see.

FIG. 14.1

One of Europe's most egalitarian societies: Gini 2014–2025

Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income (0–100), 2014–2025 (EU-SILC; survey year)



Poland: 30.8 (2014) → 24.9 (2025); EU27: 30.9 → 29.2

S80/S20 (income of the richest 20% to the poorest 20%): 4.98 (2010) → 3.63 (2025); EU: 4.62

The fifth-lowest Gini coefficient in the EU — ahead of the Netherlands, Finland, Austria and all the Nordic countries

Two lines diverging: Poland falls from 30.8 to 24.9, the Union barely moves. In a decade Poland went from the EU average to the fifth-lowest level of income inequality in the Union. The richest 20% of Poles now have 3.6 times the income of the poorest 20% — against fivefold in 2010.

This is the strongest correction to the thesis set out in this document's brief: income inequality is not a dark side of contemporary Poland. The dark sides of inequality have other dimensions — the next charts show them.

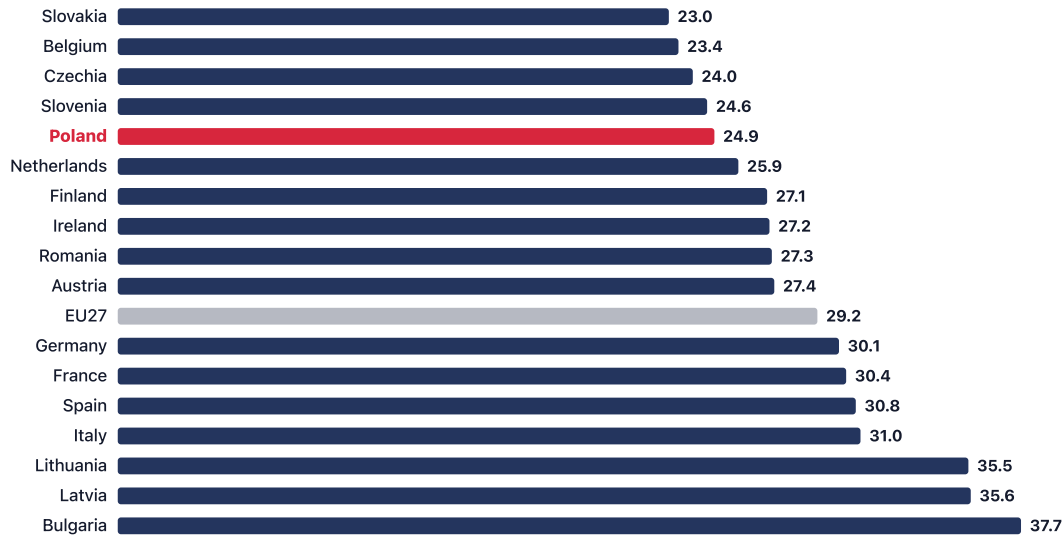
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FIG. 14.2

Income inequality in the EU, 2025: Poland fifth from the bottom

Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income, 2025, selected EU countries (lower = more equal)



Lowest: Slovakia 23.0, Belgium 23.4, Czechia 24.0, Slovenia 24.6, Poland 24.9; highest: Bulgaria 37.7, Latvia 35.6, Lithuania 35.5

The 2025 ranking places Poland among the most egalitarian societies on the continent — between Slovenia and the Netherlands, clearly ahead of Germany, France, Spain and Italy. The gender

pay gap (next chart) and the poverty rate (chapter 4) complete the picture: three independent measures, one image.

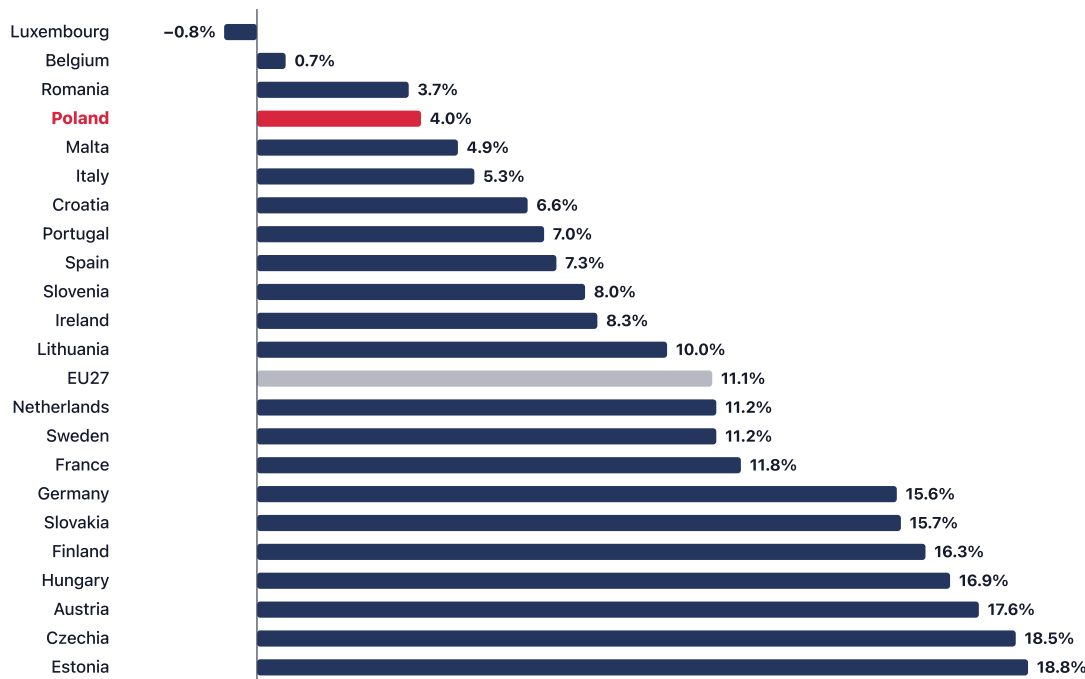
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FIG. 14.3

The fourth-lowest gender pay gap in the Union

Unadjusted gender pay gap, %, 2024, EU countries



Poland 4.0% (2024) vs EU 11.1%; Germany 15.6%, Czechia 18.5%, Estonia 18.8%

Women in the Sejm: 29.6% (2023, a record) — still below the EU average (32.7%); 58% of students are women

Poland has the fourth-lowest pay gap in the EU — nearly three times below the EU average and four times below Germany's. Partly it is structural: a highly feminised public sector and women's higher education (the gender gap in

tertiary degrees — 17.9 pp in women's favour — is among the largest in the EU).

Political representation lags: a record 29.6% of women in the Sejm is still below the EU average, with 44% of women on the lists — women were systematically placed lower down.

SOURCES

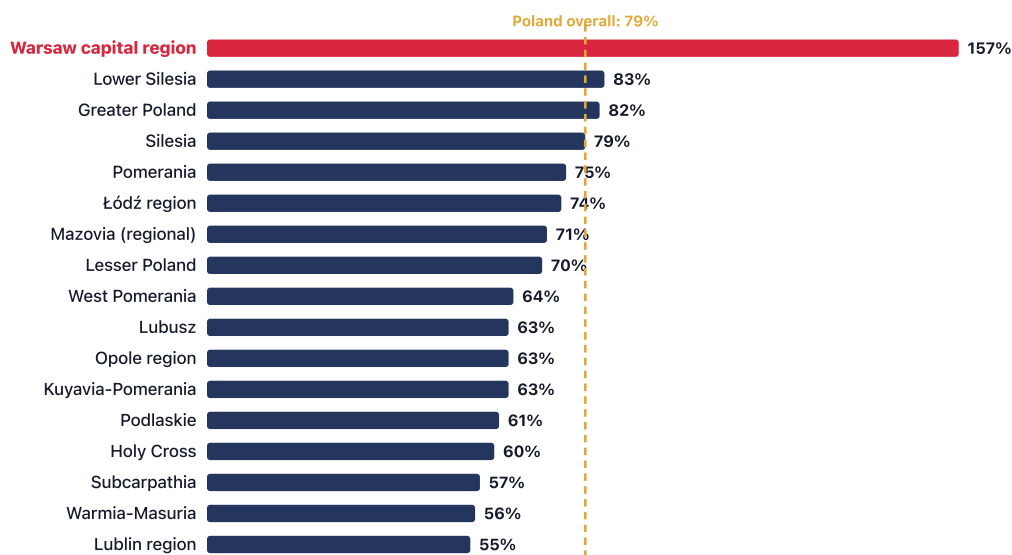
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The series is volatile year to year (Poland 2015–2024: 4.5–8.5%); read the trend, not a single reading. A low unadjusted gap partly reflects lower labour-force participation of lower-earning women.

FIG. 14.4

There is no 'Poland B', there is a Poland growing from different levels: regional GDP

GDP per capita in PPS as % of the EU27 average, NUTS-2 regions, 2024



Warsaw capital region: 157% of the EU average (2024) — richer than Berlin or Vienna; Lublin region: 55%

A 2.85-fold spread; but ALL regions grew: Lublin 49 → 55, Subcarpathia 50 → 57, Greater Poland 75 → 82 (2015→2024)

The sharpest inequality in contemporary Poland is not income but geography. The Warsaw region is statistically richer than Berlin and Vienna, while six eastern and northern regions do not exceed 62% of the EU average. The spread between the richest and poorest region is almost threefold.

An important caveat: every region grew and none stood still — Lublin and Subcarpathia gained 6–7 points each since 2015. The distance to Warsaw is not shrinking, but the distance to the Union is — in every voivodeship.

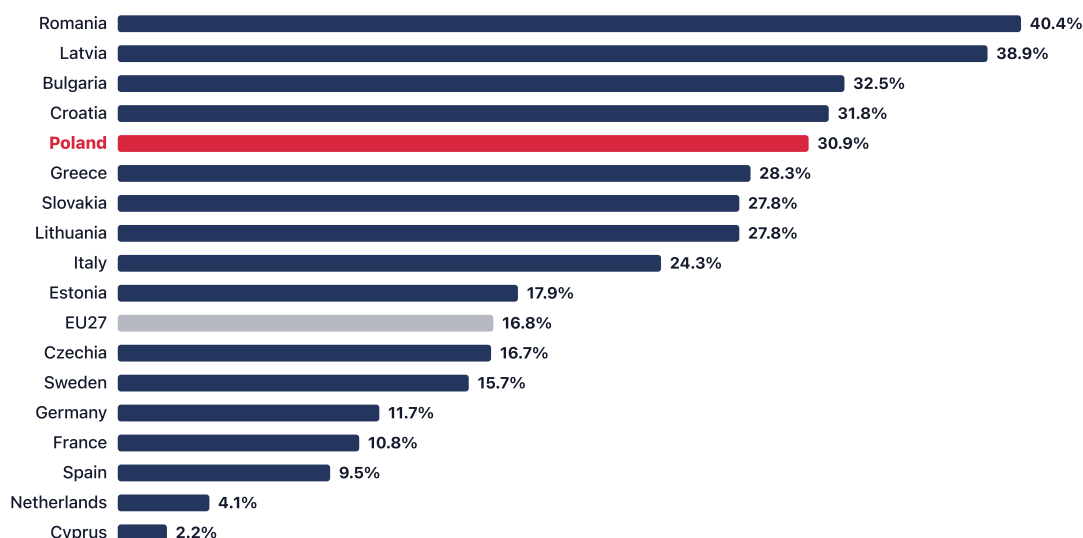
SOURCES

1. Eurostat, tgs00006 — regional GDP per capita in PPS (% of EU27 average), NUTS 2 <<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data-browser/view/tgs00006/default/table>> (2026-02)

FIG. 14.5

Cars yes, square metres no: one in three Poles lives in an overcrowded home

Overcrowding rate, % of population, 2025, selected EU countries



Overcrowding: Poland 30.9% (2025) vs EU 16.8%; 43.4% in 2015 — down 12.5 pp in a decade

Stock: 425.9 dwellings per 1,000 inhabitants (2024), 32.2 m² per person; cars: 639 per 1,000 (EU: 584)

The most vivid dark side of living standards after demography: almost one in three Poles lives in overcrowded conditions, nearly twice as often as the average EU resident — though the rate is falling fast (by 12.5 pp in a decade). Poles earn ever better but still live cramped.

The contrast with motorisation is telling: Poland now has more cars per inhabitant than Germany (639 vs 593) — partly because of used-car imports and weak public transport outside the big cities. Cars yes, square metres no.

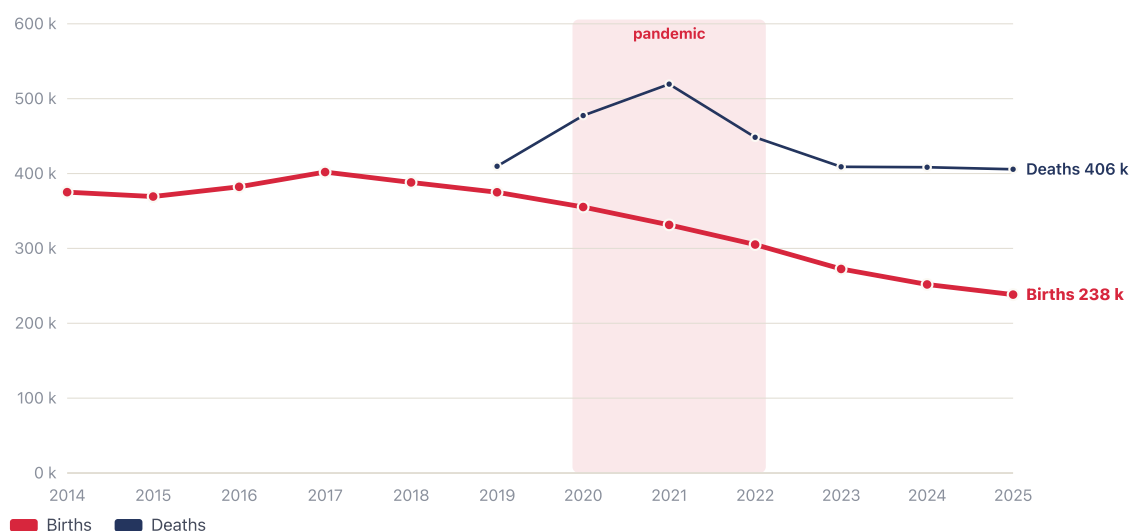
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3. Eurostat, [road_eqs_carhab — passenger cars per 1 000 inhabitants](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/road_eqs_carhab/default/table?lang=en) (2026-08)

FIG. 14.6

Demographic scissors: births down 40% since 2017

Live births and deaths in Poland, thousands, 2014–2025



Births: 401,982 (2017) → 238,264 (2025); deaths 2025: 405,747; natural decrease about 167,000 — the most since the war outside the pandemic years

Population: 37.3 m (Statistics Poland, 31 Dec 2025); median age 43.4 years (+4.2 years in 11 years)

Statistics Poland simulation to 2060: 30.9 m (main projection) or 28.4 m at a fertility rate of 1.10

The greatest challenge of this portrait. Poland now has 40% fewer births than in 2017, and natural decrease — 45 per 10,000 inhabitants — is the highest since the Second World War outside the pandemic years. The scissors have been opening since 2018 and nothing suggests they will close.

The Statistics Poland simulation shows the price: at 2024 fertility the country would have 28.4 million inhabitants in 2060, a quarter fewer than today, and one in three would be over 65. It is an experimental exercise, not a forecast — but the direction is unambiguous.

SOURCES

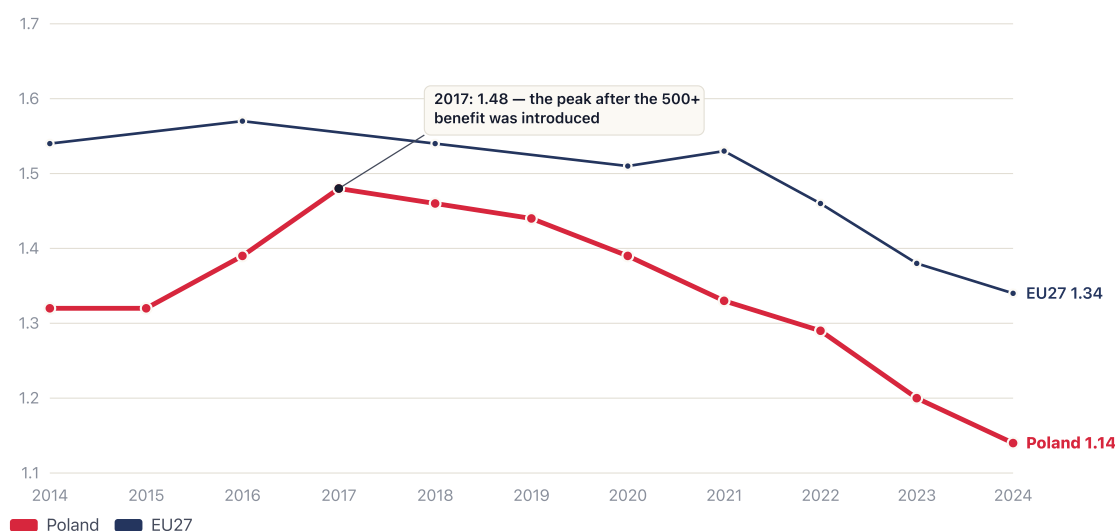
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2. GUS — Symulacja liczby ludności do 2060 r. (opracowanie eksperymentalne) <<https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/ludnosc/prognoza-ludnosci/symulacja-liczby-ludnosci-do-2060-r-opracowanie-eksperymentalne,17,1.html>> (2025-11)

Statistics Poland reports 37,333,000 inhabitants (national definition); Eurostat — 36,333,000 on 1 Jan 2026 (resident population, excluding people abroad for over 12 months).

FIG. 14.7

Transfers cut child poverty but did not raise births: fertility 1.14

Total fertility rate (children per woman), Poland vs EU27, 2014–2024



TFR: 1.48 (2017, a year after the 500+ benefit began) → 1.14 (2024); EU: 1.34; replacement level: 2.10

A 23% fall in seven years — despite the largest child transfers in history

The strongest proof that money does not buy births: the 500+ programme (800+ since 2024) cut child poverty sharply (chapter 4), but after a brief rebound in 2017 fertility fell to the lowest level ever recorded. Poland is now 0.2 below the EU average, which is itself falling.

The fertility decline is Europe-wide, but faster in Poland — the only indicator in this portrait where Poland has in recent years lost ground to the EU instead of gaining it.

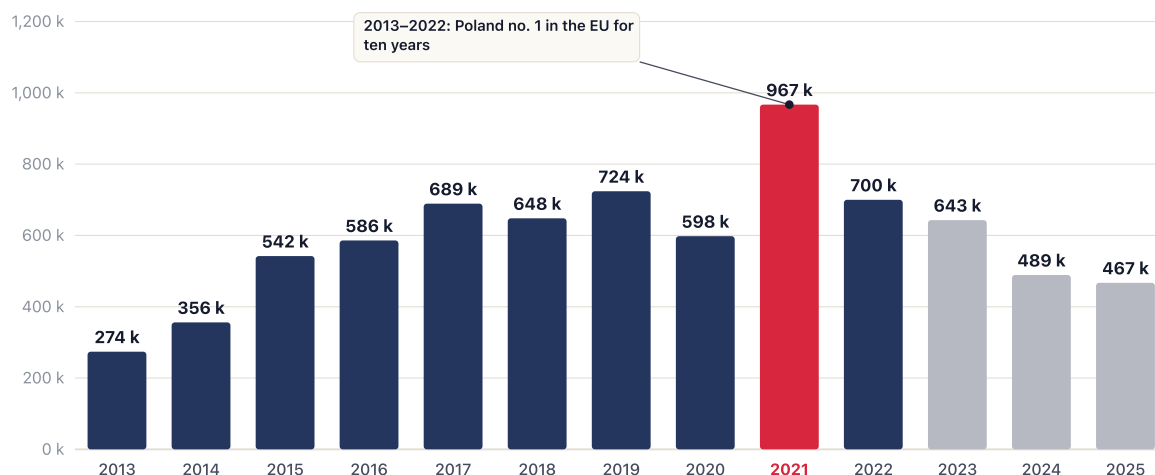
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FIG. 14.8

A country of emigration became a country of immigration: first residence permits

First residence permits issued to foreigners in Poland, thousands, 2013–2025



Poland was no. 1 in the whole EU continuously from 2013 to 2022; peak: 967,345 permits in 2021; 2025: 467,314 (3rd, after Spain and Germany)

950,775 people from Ukraine under temporary protection (July 2026, 2nd in the EU after Germany); 1.34 m foreigners insured with ZUS (June 2026), 901,000 of them Ukrainians

The best-documented proof of reversed migration: a country that after 2004 was a symbol of emigration issued, for a decade, more first residence permits than Germany, France or Spain. The fall after 2021 reflects temporary protection for Ukrainians (a different procedure), not a drop in immigration.

Foreigners now make up about 8% of those insured with the social-insurance institution and about 6% of workers — and it is largely they who fill the gap opened by the scissors of the previous chart. Official population statistics do not yet see it.

SOURCES

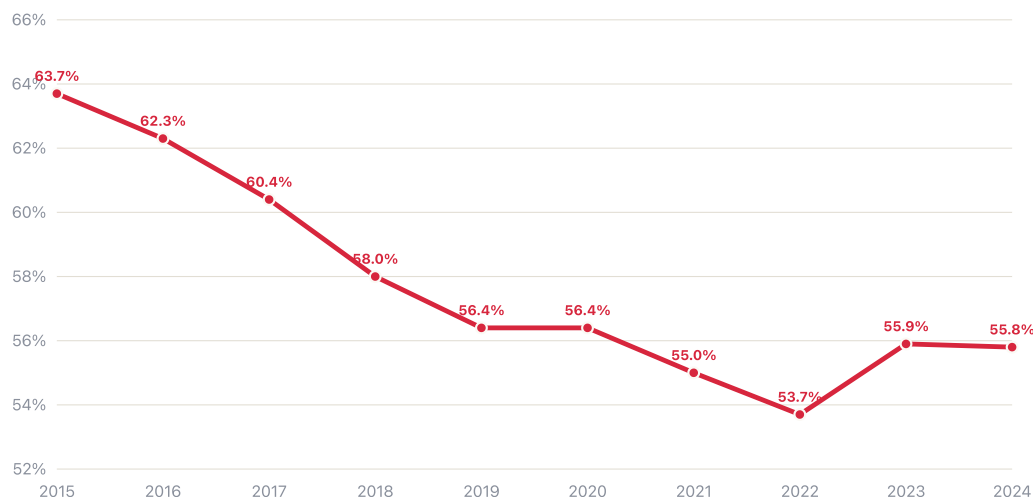
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2. Eurostat, migr_asytpsm — beneficiaries of temporary protection at the end of the month <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_asytpsm/default/table> (2026-08)
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People under temporary protection are mostly not counted in the official population; Eurostat reports just 1.2% non-citizens in Poland's population — population statistics have not caught up with reality.

FIG. 14.9

More złoty, a smaller slice of the cake: pensions relative to wages

Average ZUS pension as % of the average wage, 2015–2024



Average ZUS pension: PLN 3,862.61 (2024, +14.0% y/y), but only 55.8% of the average wage — against 63.7% in 2015

Pensioners below 50% of median income: 4.1% (2015) → 6.8% (2024); 9.38 m people draw benefits — 25% of the population

A concrete, generational dark side of the wage boom: pensions are rising fast in nominal terms (+14% in 2024), but their ratio to wages has fallen by almost 8 points since 2015. Workers are getting richer faster than pensioners, and the share of very low benefits is growing.

Together with demography (the previous charts) this forms the most important long-term tension of this portrait: fewer and fewer workers, more and more beneficiaries, and a benefit-to-wage ratio that is already declining.

SOURCES

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CHAPTER 15

Poland in Europe and the world

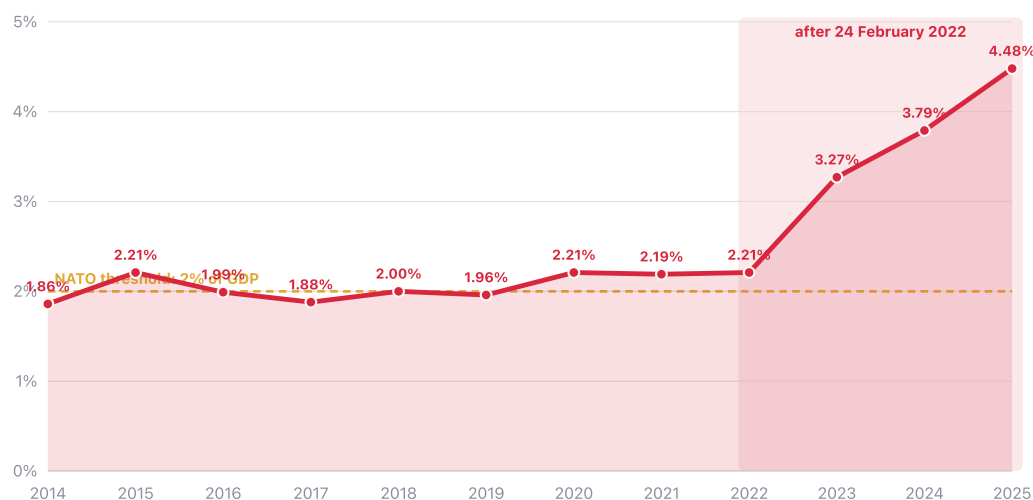
Twenty years in the Union mean a net balance of EUR 162 bn and motorways that did not exist for half a century. Today Poland spends the most in NATO on defence relative to GDP, hosts the second-largest group of refugees from Ukraine, and for the first time in history produces less than half of its electricity from coal.

EU membership is the best-documented civilisational leap in Poland's post-war history — visible in incomes (chapter 4) but also in hard infrastructure: the motorway and expressway network grew from 434 km in 2000 to 5,593 km in 2026. The second pillar of Poland's position is security: in three years the country became the Alliance's largest relative defence spender. The third is the energy transition, which has accelerated even though it started from the EU's heaviest dependence on coal.

FIG. 15.1

From laggard to NATO leader: defence spending as % of GDP

Poland's defence expenditure, % of GDP, NATO methodology, 2014–2025



1.86% of GDP (2014) → 4.48% (2025, NATO methodology) — the highest in the Alliance; Lithuania 4.0%, Latvia 3.7%, Estonia 3.4%

About USD 44.3 bn (2025) — the 6th-largest defence budget in NATO; 54.4% on equipment (2nd after Greece); USD 948 per inhabitant

The government reports 4.7% of GDP for 2025 (different scope, incl. the Armed Forces Support Fund); 2026 draft budget: about 4.8%

From the Alliance's laggard to first place in three years. Until 2022 Poland hovered around the 2% threshold; after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine spending more than doubled. Over half the budget goes on equipment — a sign of real modernisation, not mere upkeep.

A methodological note: NATO reports 4.48% for 2025, the Polish government 4.7% — both are true, differing in scope (the Armed Forces Support Fund and the timing of booking). In the peace ranking (chapter 12) this militarisation is the one component that costs Poland points.

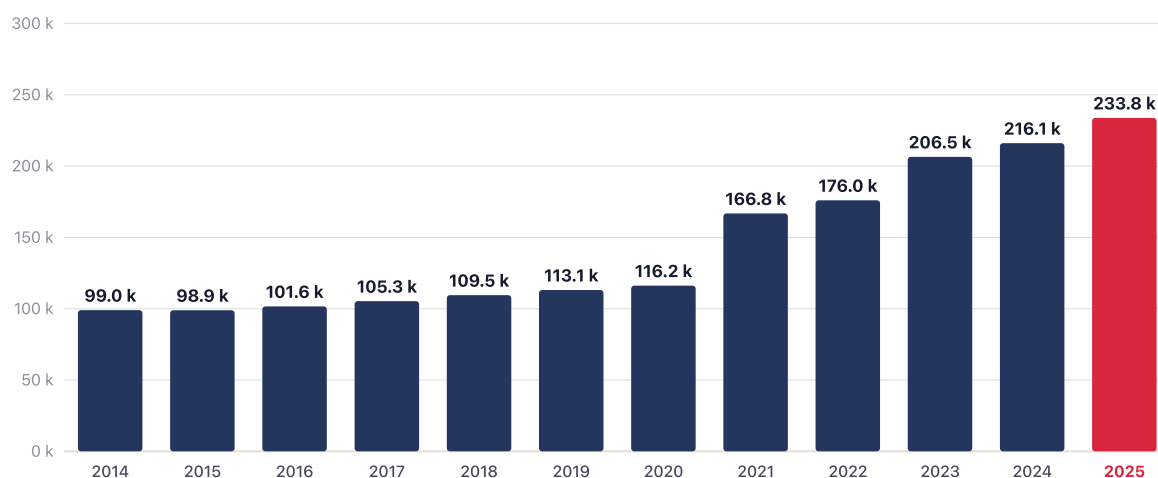
SOURCES

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FIG. 15.2

An army that doubled: the strength of the Polish Armed Forces

Strength of Poland's armed forces, thousand soldiers, NATO data, 2014–2025



99,000 soldiers (2014) → 233,800 (2025), +136%; the jump since 2021 — Territorial Defence Forces and the post-2022 build-up

Defence spending per inhabitant: USD 257 (2014) → USD 948 (2025)

Poland's army more than doubled its personnel in a decade — a change of scale, not a correction. Headcount and capital intensity are growing together: spending per inhabitant rose almost

fourfold. Poland is today the second EU country after Germany in hosting refugees from Ukraine and the key logistics hub for aid to Kyiv.

SOURCES

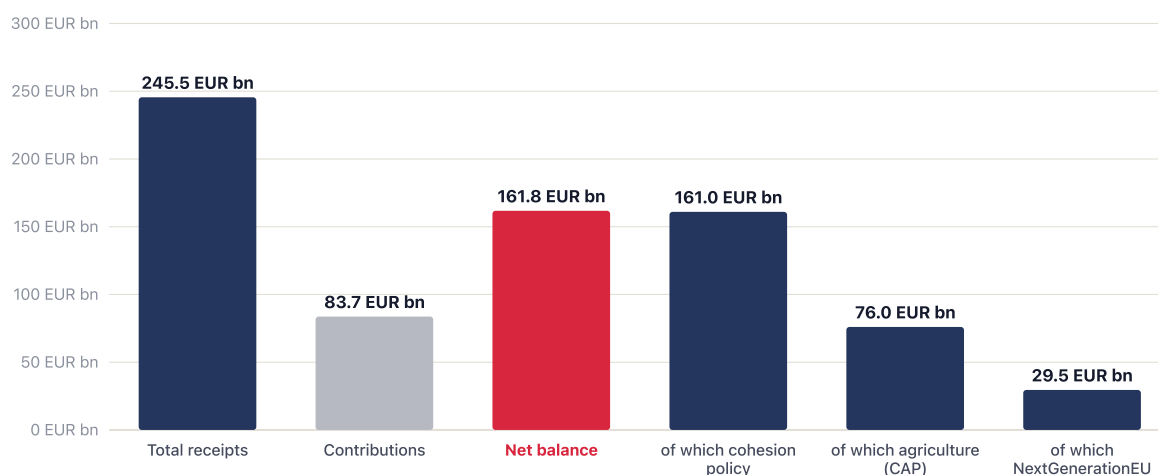
1. NATO — Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2025), tabela 7 (military personnel) <<https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/webready/documents/finance/def-exp-2025-en.pdf>> (2025-08)

The 2020→2021 jump partly reflects a change in how the Territorial Defence Forces are reported.

FIG. 15.3

Twenty years in the Union: a net balance of EUR 161.8 bn

Financial flows Poland–EU, 2004–2023, EUR bn (current prices)



2004–2023: receipts EUR 245.5 bn, contributions EUR 83.7 bn, net balance EUR 161.8 bn — about EUR 12 bn a year on average (2–3.5% of GDP)

Two-thirds for cohesion policy (161 bn), just under a third for agriculture (76 bn); NextGenerationEU grants: 29.5 bn

Two-thirds of the transfers went into cohesion policy — hence the visible effect on roads, rail, sewage plants and municipal infrastructure. For two decades Poland was the EU budget's largest net beneficiary in absolute terms; from 2027, as

income passes 90% of the average in successive regions, the stream will start to shrink.

The balance is only part of the account: access to the single market explains most of the sixfold rise in exports (chapter 5) — a benefit absent from this table.

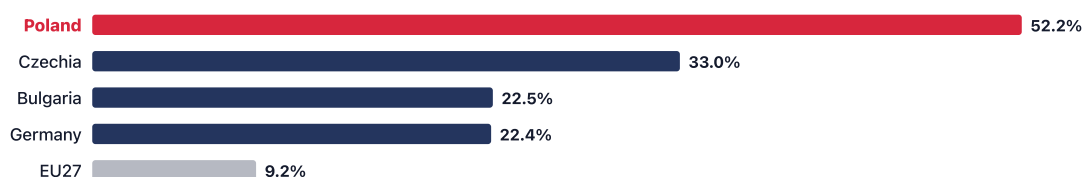
SOURCES

1. SGH / Ministerstwo Finansów — Financial flows between Poland and the EU 2004–2023 and prospects for their changes <<https://gazeta.sgh.waw.pl/en/people-events/financial-flows-between-poland-and-eu-2004-2023-and-prospects-their-changes>> (2024)

FIG. 15.4

Below 50% for the first time: coal in Polish power generation

Coal's share of electricity generation, %, 2025, Poland against the EU



Coal's share of electricity: 79.7% (2016) → 55.2% (2024) → 52.2% (2025); below 50% for six months of 2025, and in June renewables produced more than coal

Renewables 2025: 31.4% (a record 54.7 TWh); gas 14.1%; solar PV 25.9 GW of capacity; in 2025 1.4 TWh of renewable energy was curtailed by grid constraints

The first nuclear plant (Lubiatowo-Kopalino, 3 × AP1000): construction from 2028, the first unit planned for 2036

The energy transition has accelerated, but it started from the heaviest coal dependence in the Union. In 2025 coal's share fell to 52% — 27 points below a decade earlier — and renewables delivered a record 31% of power. Poland and Germany together still account for over 70% of all coal-fired electricity in the EU.

The grid is not keeping up with the sources: in 2025 1.4 TWh of renewable energy was curtailed because of transmission constraints — twice as much as a year earlier. The nuclear plant is to deliver its first power in 2036; the schedule has already slipped several times, so it is a plan, not a fact.

SOURCES

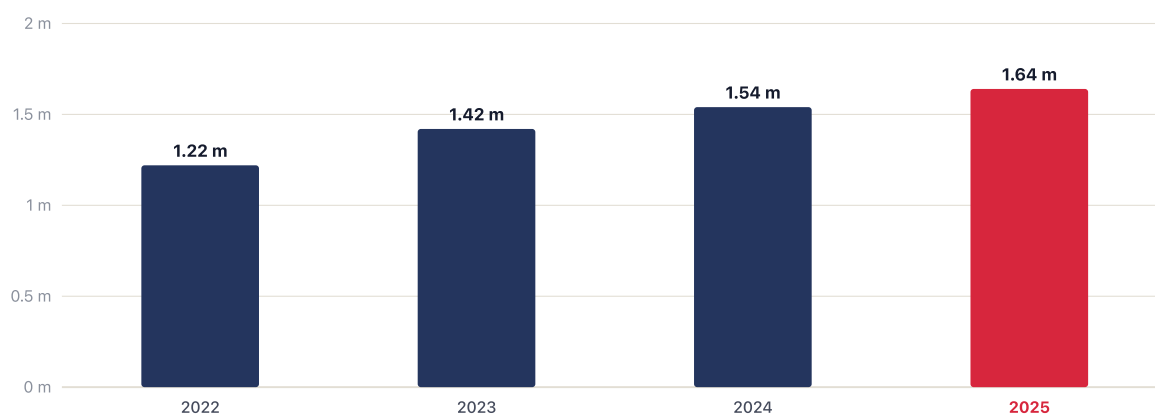
1. Forum Energii — Transformacja energetyczna w Polsce. Edycja 2026 (dane URE i MKiŚ) <<https://www.forum-energii.eu/transformacja-energetyczna-w-polsce-edycja-2026>> (2026-04)
2. elektro.info — W UE już mniej niż 10 proc. energii pochodzi z węgla, a w Polsce 52 proc. (dane Ember/Forum Energii) <<https://www.elektro.info.pl/arttykul/najnowsze/224508,w-ue-juz-mniej-niz-10-proc-energii-pochodzi-z-wegla-a-w-polsce-52-7-proc>> (2026-01)
3. Polskie Elektrownie Jądrowe — kluczowe informacje o projekcie; World Nuclear Association (harmonogram) <<https://pej.pl/en/the-project/key-information/>> (2026-08)

Shares of gross generation; sources give 52.2–52.7% depending on method — the chart uses the Forum Energii report value.

FIG. 15.5

1.6 million home power plants: prosumers

Number of renewable micro-installations in Poland, millions, year-end, 2022–2025



1,636,673 renewable micro-installations, 13.9 GW of capacity, 8.95 TWh of energy (end-2025) — about 5% of national generation; 99.9% are solar PV

Growth is slowing after the billing rules changed: +16.1% (2023) → +8.9% (2024) → +6.0% (2025); growth is shifting to large farms

One graphic shows success and braking at once: more than 1.6 million households and firms produce their own power — one of the fastest prosumer booms in Europe — but after the billing

system changed, growth fell from the teens to six per cent a year. For the first time in six years the main engine of solar growth is large farms, not rooftops — the market is maturing.

SOURCES

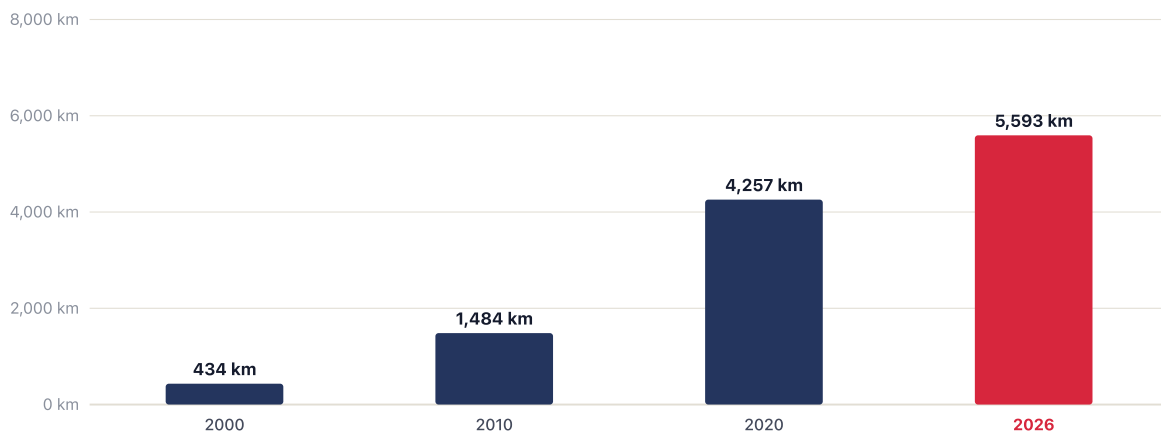
1. [Urząd Regulacji Energetyki — Raport URE: w Polsce mamy już ponad 1,6 mln mikroinstalacji OZE](https://www.ure.gov.pl/pl/urzad/informacje-ogolne/aktualnosci/13173,Raport-URE-w-Polsce-mamy-juz-ponad-16-mln-mikroinstalacji-OZE.html) <<https://www.ure.gov.pl/pl/urzad/informacje-ogolne/aktualnosci/13173,Raport-URE-w-Polsce-mamy-juz-ponad-16-mln-mikroinstalacji-OZE.html>> (2026)

Values for 2022–2024 back-calculated from the annual increments reported by the regulator (URE).

FIG. 15.6

Roads that did not exist: 434 km in 2000, 5,593 km in 2026

Length of the motorway and expressway network in Poland, km



Motorways and expressways: 434 km (2000) → about 1,484 (2010) → about 4,257 (2020) → 5,593 km (August 2026: 1,950 km of motorways + 3,643 km of expressways); 1,192 km under construction

PKP Intercity: a record 89.2 m passengers in 2025 (+14% y/y), about 244,000 a day; Baltic Hub: 2.77 m TEU (+23%)

Between 1970 and 2000 Poland built 434 km of motorways and expressways; in the decade 2011–2020 alone — 2,773 km. Today the network runs to 5,600 km, about two-thirds of the planned target shape, with another 1,200 km under construction. This is the money from the previous chart turned into concrete.

Rail is catching up: PKP Intercity carried a record 89 million passengers in 2025, a third more than two years earlier, and ordered Poland's first high-speed trains. Gdańsk's Baltic Hub — the only deep-water terminal on the Baltic — handled a record 2.77 million containers after its T3 terminal opened.

SOURCES

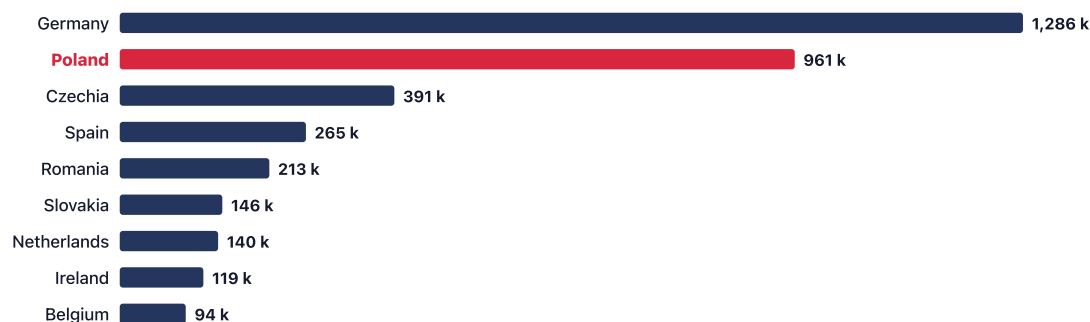
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2. Wikipedia — Highways in Poland (przyrosty dekadowe 1970–2020 na podstawie danych GDDKiA) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Highways_in_Poland> (2026)
3. Rzeczpospolita / PKP Intercity — podsumowanie 2025 r. <<https://www.rp.pl/transport/art43722721-pkp-intercity-podsumowalo-2025-rok-padly-rekordy-historyczna-umowa>> (2026-01)

Values for 2010 and 2020 compounded from decade increments (approximate); the target network is about 8,200 km.

FIG. 15.7

A second home for a million: temporary protection for Ukrainians in the EU

People under temporary protection from Ukraine, end of June 2026, thousands, EU countries



June 2026: Germany 1,286,230, Poland 961,170 (21.8% of all in the EU), Czechia 390,810; EU total about 4.41 m

About 1.9 m people registered in the PESEL-UKR register in total, but far fewer actually live in Poland — the number is slowly falling

Four years after the war began, Poland still hosts almost a million people under temporary protection — one in five Ukrainian refugees in the Union — and is second after Germany in absolute numbers and first relative to population among

the large states. This is the same group towards which Poles' attitudes have clearly cooled (chapter 13): the numbers on hospitality and the numbers on antipathy have to be read together.

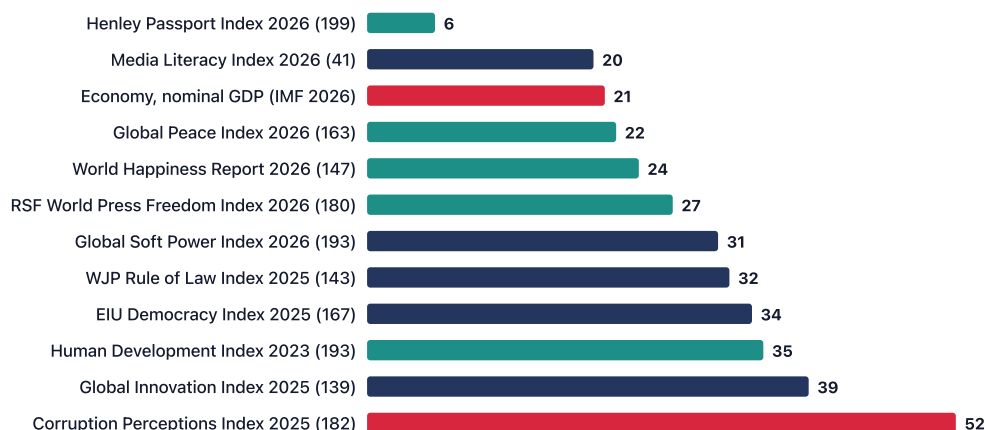
SOURCES

1. Eurostat — komunikat: temporary protection for persons fleeing Ukraine, June 2026 <<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20260811-1>> (2026-08)
2. Eurostat, migr_asytpsm — beneficiaries of temporary protection at the end of the month <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_asytpsm/default/table> (2026-08)

FIG. 15.8

Where Poland sits on the world map: positions in global rankings

Poland's position in selected global rankings, 2025–2026 (lower = better; number of countries in brackets)



Passport: 6th (Henley, 183 visa-free destinations); peace: 22nd/163; happiness: 24th/147; rule of law: 32nd/143; HDI: 35th/193 (0.906, "very high")

Innovation: 39th/139 (GII); democracy: 34th/167 (EIU 7.65, "flawed democracy"); corruption: 52nd/182 (CPI 53); soft power: 31st/193; economy: 21st (nominal GDP, IMF 2026)

One ranking strip shows the country's whole profile: in safety, happiness, passport strength and human development Poland is in the world's top tier (places 6–35 of 140–200 countries); in innovation, quality of democracy and perceived

corruption — in the second or third ten. Its economic position (21st) is higher than its brand position (31st) — the gap this document tries to close.

SOURCES

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2. WIPO — Global Innovation Index 2025, profil Polski <<https://www.wipo.int/gii-ranking/en/poland>> (2025-09)
3. Henley & Partners — Henley Passport Index (ranking) <<https://www.henleyglobal.com/passport-index/ranking>> (2026-04)
4. Economist Intelligence Unit — Democracy Index 2025 (7,65 pkt, 34. miejsce) <<https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2025/>> (2026-02)
5. Institute for Economics and Peace — Global Peace Index 2026 <<https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Global-Peace-Index-2026-Report.pdf>> (2026-06)
6. Transparency International — CPI 2025, Polska; RSF — World Press Freedom Index 2026; WJP — Rule of Law Index 2025; Brand Finance — Global Soft Power Index 2026; OSIS — Media Literacy Index 2026; World Happiness Report 2026 <<https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/poland>> (2026)

Rankings cover different numbers of countries — 6th of 199 means something different from 20th of 41. The Henley and Brand Finance positions come from reviews (dynamically loaded / non-public tables) — to be verified.

CHAPTER 16

The composite portrait: lights and shadows on one page

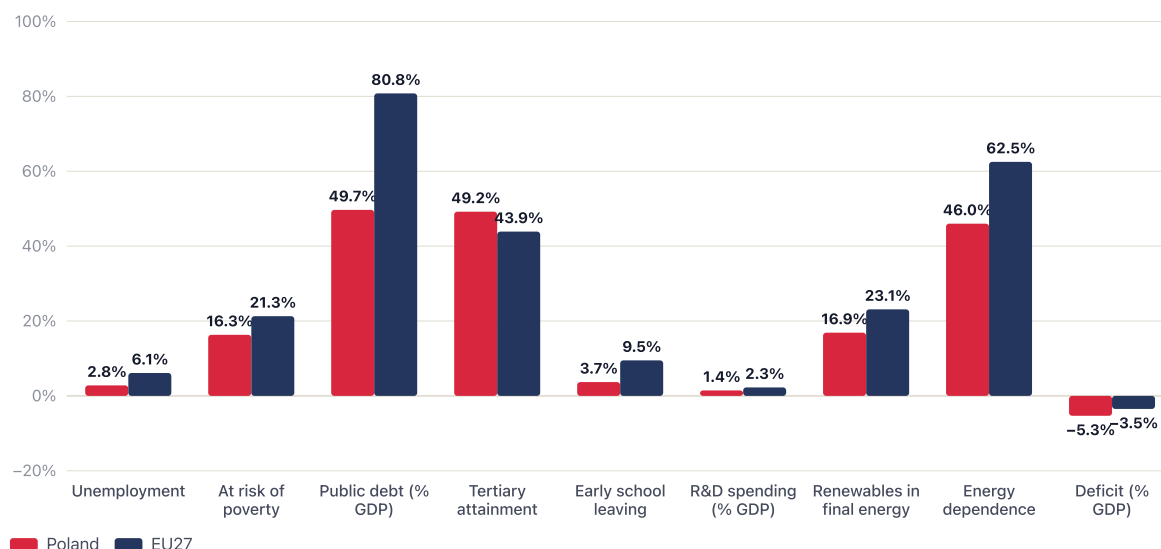
If one page of this document survives, let it be this one: where Poland beats the EU average, where it falls short — and how it looks against the world.

A self-portrait is neither a eulogy nor an indictment. Side by side: in the labour market, poverty, public debt, education and safety Poland is today better than the average EU country — often by a lot; in research and development, renewable energy, the deficit, fertility, housing and social trust — worse. Against the world it remains a calm, safe and rapidly enriching country. Its biggest challenges are internal: demography, public finances, and whether Poles can trust one another.

FIG. 16.1

Poland versus the EU average in ten indicators

Selected Eurostat indicators, Poland vs EU27, 2024 (mixed units: % or % of GDP; fertility omitted — children per woman 1.29 vs 1.46)



Better: unemployment, at-risk-of-poverty rate, public debt, tertiary attainment, early school leaving, energy dependence

Worse: R&D spending, renewables in final energy, the deficit, fertility

One chart that sums up the whole document from a single Eurostat table. Poland beats the Union where work, education and household finances count; it falls short where investing in

the future counts — research, clean energy, children — and in public-finance discipline.

The order is no accident: these are exactly the areas where catching up takes decades, not parliamentary terms.

SOURCES

1. Eurostat — „Poland in the EU” (materiał statystyczny na polską prezydencję w Radzie UE, stan na 2 grudnia 2024 r.) <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/4187653/20614054/polish-presidency-en.pdf> (2024-12)

Data from the Eurostat table prepared for the 2025 presidency (as of December 2024); newer readings of individual indicators are in the thematic chapters. Deficit: negative values.

FIG. 16.2

Six lights

What Poland can be proud of — in numbers, not adjectives

+114%

real GDP growth since EU accession

3.6 times the EU average (2004–2025)

81%

of the EU average — income per head (PPS)

up from 52% in 2004; level with Portugal

0.69

homicides per 100,000 inhabitants

7× fewer than the USA; 22nd in the Global Peace Index

24.9

Gini coefficient — 5th lowest in the EU

AROE 15.0% (EU 20.9%), pay gap 4.0% (EU 11.1%)

489

PISA maths points — 2nd in the EU

138 IOI medals from 114 contestants

24th

in the World Happiness Report

up 24 places since 2022; 89% feel safe

Every number on this tile has its chart and source in the thematic chapters

SOURCES

1. Źródła szczegółowe przy każdym wykresie w rozdziałach 3–15 (Bank Światowy, Eurostat, IEP, OECD, IOI, World Happiness Report, CBOS) <<https://polska.tkm.cc/zrodla>> (2026-08)

FIG. 16.3

Six shadows

What Poland has to work on — in numbers too

1.14

children per woman (2024) — a record low

births –40% since 2017; natural decrease 167,000

–7.3%

of GDP — general government deficit

2nd highest in the EU; debt rising fastest in the Union

22%

of Poles think most people can be trusted

flat since 2002; 19% trust political parties

43%

declare antipathy towards Ukrainians (2026)

17% in 2023; support for taking in refugees 94% → 42%

30.9%

of Poles live in an overcrowded home

EU: 16.8%; house prices +77% since 2019

1.41%

of GDP on R&D (EU: 2.24%)

the first fall after a decade; 0 universities in the world's top 200

None of these indicators is a catastrophe against the world; each is a real, measurable problem against the Union

SOURCES

1. Źródła szczegółowe przy każdym wykresie w rozdziałach 3–15 (Eurostat, GUS, CBOS, QS) <<https://polska.tkm.cc/zrodla>> (2026-08)

About the project and method

What it is

"Poland: A Self-Portrait" ("Polek i Polaków Portret Własny") is a bilingual (polska.tkm.cc / poland.tkm.cc) infographic document in the style known from Visual Capitalist: a dozen or so chapters, several dozen charts, each with a source. It is addressed both to readers in Poland and to foreigners who have heard little about the country, or only half-century-old stereotypes. The aim is to show what Poland and its people are positively known for — their economic, scientific and cultural achievements — without omitting the dark sides, but without dramatising them either: against the world, Poland remains an oasis of social calm and relative prosperity.

Where the numbers come from

Every chart carries its source with a link and a date. We prefer primary and official sources: Statistics Poland (GUS), Eurostat, the IMF, the World Bank, the OECD, the National Bank of Poland, CBOS, NATO, UN agencies, and the institutes behind the rankings (IEP, RSF, Transparency International, WJP, Brand Finance, OSIS). Where a number comes from a secondary source or could not be confirmed in the original, we say so in a footnote under the chart. Where two sources give different values (e.g. public debt by Eurostat and by the national definition, defence spending by NATO and by the government), we give both with an explanation.

The figures were collected in August 2026 and checked in two independent passes (collection, then adversarial verification of each value against its source). Errors remain possible — every correction is visible in the project repository's history.

How the charts are made

The charts are generated automatically from one data file per chart (data, sources, descriptions in both languages), in a uniform visual style. The working version of each graphic is a simple, legible chart; for some of them polished illustrations are produced. Every chart can be downloaded as SVG (button under each chart) and the whole document as a PDF.

What is not here

This is neither an encyclopaedia of Poland nor an academic report. The choice of topics and indicators is the authors' own; we leave out what cannot be reliably measured or documented. We do not use numbers without a source, we do not round in favour of a thesis, and we do not hide data revisions.

Contact and rights

The project is run independently (tkm.cc). Texts and charts may be quoted with attribution; the underlying data remain the property of their publishers.