

## MULTICULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON POLAND

Unusually for a country in the middle of a continent, Poland is one of the most ethnically, religiously and linguistically homogeneous nations in the world.

**1. In the 2011 census, over 91% of the population declared Polish as their national identity<sup>1</sup>.**

In comparison to other countries in Europe, national and ethnic minorities form only a very minor percentage of the population.

**2. Official statistics put the number of immigrants in Poland at under 1% of the population<sup>2</sup>.**

Immigrant communities in Poland are numerically insignificant when contrasted with other European countries.

**3. Nearly 37 million people (out of a population of approx. 38.5 million) have been baptized in the Roman-Catholic church<sup>3</sup>.**

Religious rites of passage from the Roman-Catholic church occupy a unique position in the public space in Poland, the likes of which may be unknown in societies with a greater diversity of faiths, or countries where the separation between state and religion is enforced on an institutional level.

For these reasons in Poland, racial, religious and ethnic traits are often equated with notions of cultural or national identity, in a way that will not have an equivalence in many other cultures or countries.

**No polar bears here!**

So, where do the Poles get their name from?

The Polish people take their name from the Old Slavic word *pole* (meaning *plains* or *field*) and the tribe which inhabited the area of the historic Greater Poland region.

Masculine: Polak, feminine: Polka



**And no, we're nowhere near the North Pole!**

<sup>1</sup> Buchowski, M. & Chlewińska, K.: *Do Silesians Exist and can Silesia be Autonomous? Limits of Ethno-Political Tolerance in Poland*, 4. National Case Studies - Political Life Final Country Reports, ACCEPT PLURALISM Research Project, Poznań 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Buchowski, M. & Chlewińska, K.: "Addressing tolerance and diversity discourses in Europe," in: *A Comparative Overview of 16 European Countries*, Ricard Zapata-Barrero & Anna Triandafyllidou (Eds.), ACCEPT PLURALISM Research Project, Poznań, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Buchowski, M. & Chlewińska, K.: *Tolerance of Cultural Diversity in Poland and its Limitation*, 5. New Knowledge Country Synthesis Reports, ACCEPT PLURALISM Research Project, Poznań, 2012.

## Diversity and Poland

### So, what is unique about diversity in Poland?

Prior to the Second World War, amongst many other minority groups that lived in the capital, approximately 30% of Warsaw residents were Jewish. Following WWII the national boundaries of Central Europe were redrawn along perceived ethnic lines. The ethnic cleansing of post-war Poland was further amplified by the Communist authorities carrying out population exchanges with Germany and the Soviet Union.

It is therefore useful to remind ourselves that Poland was not always as religiously and ethnically homogenous as it is today. The linguistic, cultural and ethnic landscape that stems from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was diverse – as illustrated in the much-cited opening line of the Polish epic poem *Pan Tadeusz* by national poet Adam Mickiewicz (compulsory reading in Polish schools):

Litwo! Ojczyzno moja! ty jesteś jak zdrowie;  
Ile cię trzeba cenić, ten tylko się dowie,  
Kto cię stracił.

Lithuania, my fatherland! You are like health;  
How much you must be valued, will only discover  
The one who has lost you.<sup>4</sup>

There are 9 officially recognized national minorities in Poland (Belarusian, Czech, Lithuanian, German, Armenian, Russian, Slovak, Ukrainian and Jewish), 4 ethnic minorities (Roma, Tartar, Lemko and Karaim), as well as the (regional) linguistic minorities: Silesian and Kashubian.

The 2011 census found the largest declared minority identity to be Silesian. Considering that Silesians are not actually recognized as such by the state, but considered a regional linguistic group<sup>5</sup>, the distinction between national, ethnic and linguistic minorities in Poland is certainly not without controversy.

### A word of warning:

Please be aware that a committed aim by successive Polish governments and the Polish foreign ministry is to raise international awareness and understanding of the fact that during the Holocaust, Poland was an occupied by Nazi forces.

Please bear in mind that referring to atrocities carried out during the occupation as being "Polish" is therefore contentious and misuse is likely to cause offence. This includes referring to extermination camps as being Polish. For more information see the Polish foreign ministry website: [http://www.msz.gov.pl/en/foreign\\_policy/against\\_polish\\_camps/](http://www.msz.gov.pl/en/foreign_policy/against_polish_camps/)

<sup>4</sup> Translation by Katie Busch-Sorensen: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pan\\_Tadeusz](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pan_Tadeusz)

<sup>5</sup> Buchowski, M. & Chlewińska, K.: *Do Silesians Exist and can Silesia be Autonomous? Limits of Ethno-Political Tolerance in Poland*, 4. National Case Studies - Political Life Final Country Reports, ACCEPT PLURALISM Research Project: 2012

## Migration and Poland

There have been **successive** waves of migration from Poland and the Polish Diaspora is one of the largest in the world, with significant populations of people of Polish ancestry located in Germany, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, Russia, France, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Ireland, the United States, Canada, Brazil and elsewhere in the Americas, Europe and Australasia, particularly Australia and New Zealand.

- According to the Office of National Statistics of the UK, Polish is the second most spoken language in England.
- Chicago, Illinois (USA) is rumored to be the second largest Polish city after Warsaw due to the dominance of a large community of Americans of Polish ancestry and Polish immigrants.

In 2009, the Irish Times reported that the mystery of one of Ireland's most notorious serial offenders had finally been uncovered. Up until that point the Irish Garda had been pursuing a man using the alias "Prawo Jazdy", who had racked up dozens of driving fines and parking tickets. Having discovered that, rather than being the name of the culprit, this is in fact Polish for "Driving license", the truth behind the criminal mastermind was finally revealed.<sup>6</sup>

Polish nationals currently make up the largest immigrant community in the Republic of Ireland.

**A word of warning:** In English, the word "Polack" (note the spelling with a "c", pronunciation is the same) is a pejorative term for people of Polish ancestry.

## National Identity

### So, what is different in a Polish identity?

Although many may take the homogeneity of Poland for granted when invoking terms such as "the Polish mentality", it is worth bearing in mind that, having been divided on numerous occasions in history, regional differences do also exist, and to this day form topics of discussion in politics, culture and in the news.

The preoccupation with national identity in Poland and a (seemingly) specific and defined concept of what that entails, may appear alien to people from more multicultural societies. However, it should be remembered that as a state Poland only gained political independence with the fall of the Soviet sphere of influence at the end of the 1980s. As a result, the building of the nation state constitutes a current event in the life of the majority of Polish adults.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/dictionary-helps-crack-case-of-notorious-polish-serial-offender-1.702863>

**polish** /'pəʊlɪʃ/

Superiority of manner or execution;  
refinement; elegance

## Challenge yourself to a new perspective!

Everyone's perspective on identity and culture is colored by the communities that they were raised in and the societies that they are part of. When interacting with people of different backgrounds it is important to remind ourselves not to take these perspectives for granted.

- 🌐 Ask yourself what you really mean by the term "culture" or "national identity" or "mentality".
- 🌐 Remind yourself that, even in a homogenous society such as modern-day Poland, these are concepts are neither constant nor are they as concretely defined as they may appear.

**Take 3 generations of an average Polish family and they will have been born in three different states under three totally different regimes. Migration is likely to have affected every generation.**

Ideas of society change with time, as do the values and cultures of the people who live there. When communicating with people of a different background it helps to avoid stereotypes and preconceptions if you remind yourself that these are not fixed definitions that can simply be applied to any region or people of the world.

## Challenge yourself to question your own assumptions about other cultures:

**When you hear discussions in the media about a culture that you are not familiar with, first of all ask yourself on what basis you are using this definition.**

For example: You hear and read a lot of assumptions about "Muslim culture" in Europe, but what when you think about it, what is actually really meant by this term?

- **A common culture of those practicing Islam as a religion?**  
i.e. a religious identity.
- **A culture common to people of Muslim ancestry?**  
i.e. an ethnic identity, albeit religion-based, (similar to how "Jewish" is recognized by the Polish state as a minority identity in Poland).
- **A culture common to majority-Muslim countries?**  
This would include very diverse nations and if we were to translate the same assumption to majority-Catholic countries, it would mean equating the cultures of Poland, Ireland, Italy, the Philippines and Argentina as being the same, simply by virtue of the fact that these countries are all majority Roman-Catholic countries.