

Country Profile Poland

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Poland, for the first time after 1989, has seemed to be the top student in building liberal democracy. Thanks to the systemic change, from a people's state and a centrally-controlled economy, Poland has been gradually heading towards an exemplary Western-type democracy. The governments have been changing thanks to electoral victories, and the country has been free from terrorism or outright political violence. However, in the background, dangerous political tendencies have been developing and they have gradually become a clear part of the mainstream of Polish politics. Growing economic inequalities, the great influence of the Polish Catholic Church, and the densifying network of anti-democratic institutions and media have eventually led to the transformation of Poland into an illiberal democracy. Homophobic, right-radical, sexist and anti-democratic activities have also been increasingly tangible in the Polish political reality.

This decline was facilitated by the Polish legal system. The Polish anti-discrimination laws are largely fragmented: apart from the ratified and fairly general international treaties, the equality of citizens before the law, and the right to equal treatment by public authorities and the prohibition of discrimination on any grounds is ensured by the Polish Constitution, the Labor Code (non-discrimination in employment based on sex, age, disability, race, religion, nationality, political beliefs, trade union membership, ethnic origin, religion, sexual orientation), and the Criminal Code (which makes it illegal to proclaim a fascist system or any other system having the features of a totalitarian system).

At the same time, EU anti-discrimination regulations are, according to lawyers from the Polish Society of Anti-Discrimination Law, being implemented by the Polish state to an insufficient and partial degree, often preventing a real fight against discrimination. Furthermore, right-wing and far-right parties are strong in the Polish political system, and they strive to water down and soften these provisions and to introduce them in a diminished manner or even to remove them from the Polish legal system. In addition, Polish law enforcement agencies are extremely inactive in the prosecution of hate crimes, and the prosecutor's offices do not regularly recognise racist or politically motivated violence as actions of this nature. In the sphere of internet communication or social media, they practically do not seek to prosecute such cases ex officio. These, in turn, are full of racist, anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, homophobic and sexist statements, and in practice there is full consent to the use of such hateful language. At the same time, along with the takeover of power by the nationalist-clerical Law and Justice party (PiS), growing consent to the use of hate speech can be noticed in the public space, and

some media campaigns (against the LGBT community or Muslim refugees) have originated in government circles, politicians of the ruling party or the related media. This significantly hampers any anti-discrimination and de-radicalisation activity, be it at the level of non-governmental organizations or activist groups.

Moreover, in the last two decades, Poland has become one of the European centers of and one of the main meeting places for the European radical right. The key event for this part of the political spectrum was the demonstration organised on the Polish Independence Day — the Independence March on November 11, which at its peak was able to attract up to 100,000 participants to Warsaw. Apart from Poles, it was attended by delegations of extreme right-wing groups and parties from Germany, Sweden, Hungary, Slovakia, Ukraine, the Czech Republic, Italy, Spain, Bulgaria, Serbia, and the US. The demonstration itself was organised by the nationalist National Movement and the national-radical National Radical Camp, and to this day it has been the main platform for presenting xenophobic, racist, homophobic, and ultra-religious slogans in the Polish public space. At the same time, the nationalist-ordoliberal ultra-Catholic party Konfederacja (Confederation) is the main hub of conspiracy theories on the coronavirus pandemic in the media and political space and it aims to end the equality of women, to promote discrimination against LGBTQ*, and to transform Poland into a country based on the most conservative interpretation of Catholicism and religious law.

The result of this political atmosphere is increasing violence against ethnic and sexual minorities, the Left, and liberals. The assassination of the liberal president of Gdańsk Paweł Adamowicz by a radicalised ex-prisoner associated with organised crime was the most notorious act of this type. Before his death, Adamowicz was the target of a media campaign by the right-wing media and was repeatedly portrayed as a traitor, a thief serving German interests. However, this act can only be considered the tip of the iceberg as the Never Again Association, which monitors the extreme right and its activity, has listed several dozen murders and hate crimes with racist and xenophobic motives in the last thirty years. LGBT, Roma, Muslim and Black people, both from Poland and migrants, are particularly vulnerable to this violence. Individuals from these groups are regularly beaten and verbally assaulted. The previous year, there was also an attempted terrorist attack on the Pride march in Lublin, in eastern Poland, foiled by the police. At the same time, representatives of extreme right-wing organisations have penetrated the military, police and, above all, the National Guard (the Territorial Defense Forces). There are known cases of functionaries and soldiers belonging to the national-Bolshevik Falanga, the national-radical National-Radical Camp or the National Movement. Furthermore, the PiS government encourages these circles, called good patriots, and attempts are made to use their representatives in current political games or to break down opposition demonstrations or women protesting against the tightening of the anti-abortion law.

At the same time, Polish society has substantially changed over the past ten years. Its secularisation is increasing significantly, and almost three million economic migrants have come to Poland, mainly from Ukraine, but also from Nepal, India, Bangladesh, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Vietnam, Georgia, and Armenia. However, according to the Freedom House, an NGO that measures the political freedoms and quality of democracies worldwide, Poland has been faring poorly in the ranking for the fourth year in a row. The scores include free and fair elections, political pluralism and participation, government action and good governance, freedom of the press, assembly and organisation, the rule of law and personal freedoms. The decline of political and media freedom in Poland is the result of the government's attacks on the independent judiciary, local governments and hateful campaigns against the LGBT community and judges in 2019. Poland has also fallen to the category of incomplete democracies and received the lowest score in the Freedom House democracy ranking 'Nations in Transit') since it was first assessed in 2011. Poland received 4.93 points out of possible 7 points. This year's confusion over the presidential election and the PiS provoking a conflict over the right to abortion may push Poland even lower into the category of 'plebiscite autocracy', in which voters confirm the legitimacy of a political party that openly and ostentatiously violates the Constitution, rejecting the values of a democratic state ruled by law.

The Polish political system is dominated by the right wing parties and is quite tilted to the right compared to the European average. There was not a single left-wing party represented in the previous parliament. Similarly, today, the Left would garner merely between seven and 10% of the vote in election polls. The ruling right-wing populist Law and Justice party (PiS) remains the strongest party in Poland, with the support of approximately 30%. The second is the conservative-liberal Civic Platform (with approximately 25% of the support) and the third place is occupied by the far-right Confederation (5-10%) and the conservative Polish People's Party (5-7%). The support for right-wing and far-right parties is more prevalent among the less educated voters, living outside large urban centers, sports fans and young men.

Social resistance to racism and right-wing radicalism is primarily grassroots and is based on the third sector and activist groups. They organise anti-fascist marches and counter-demonstrations against extreme-right demonstrations. Thanks to the cooperation of activists and NGOs with local governments, it is possible in some cases to ban or stop extreme-right marches. Nevertheless, this resistance is definitely insufficient as the right and the far right dominate the Polish political discourse, and civic activity is poorly organised. Furthermore, the Polish level of unionisation (about 9%) and the election result of the Left (approximately 10% of the vote) as well as the state's institutional support for right-wing radicals and their presence in public institutions are not conducive to stopping the growth of popularity of radical or extremist right-wing groups. There are practically no de-

radicalisation programmes implemented by the state in Poland and any measures taken in this area depend on the good will of local governments. Therefore, the main burden of carrying out such activities lies with non-governmental organizations such as the Institute of Social Safety or the Codex Foundation.

About the author

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