

Polish attitudes towards ethnic minorities and immigrants

Tolerance in Poland



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What is our attitude towards immigrants and ethnic minorities? Are we more or less tolerant than other European societies?

One of the processes now being witnessed by contemporary Europe is the increasing heterogeneity of its societies. The mixing of populations within Europe and the continual influx of immigrants are an ever greater source of ethnic diversity in European countries. This raises the question: is the observed growth in individualism coming hand-in-hand with an increased tolerance for others' differences?

The European Values Study (EVS), which has been conducted for several decades and which, among other issues, addresses the problem of tolerance towards minorities and attitudes towards immigrants, gives us the opportunity to observe changes in the level of tolerance in Poland and other European communities. Because of its international scale, the study makes it possible to analyze the prevalence of tolerant attitudes in individual countries and to test the various determinants of tolerance. This article presents the results of empirical research on

Polish attitudes towards various minority groups in Poland in comparison with other European societies.

Dimensions of tolerance

Tolerance as an abstract value is espoused more often in Poland than in most European countries. For example, the values of tolerance and respect for other people were seen as more desirable in the education of children in Poland than in the majority of other countries.

The 2008 EVS results, like those from 10 years earlier, suggest three different dimensions of tolerance – both in Poland and across Europe. The first dimension, which can be called “ethnic tolerance,” refers to attitudes towards immigrants, Muslims, people of another race, Roma, and Jews. The second dimension, which can be described as “personal tolerance,” mainly includes attitudes toward people regarded as deviants, or groups deemed troublesome or threatening: criminals, heavy drinkers, drug addicts, homosexuals, the mentally disturbed, and people with AIDS. The third dimension refers to people characterized by extreme political attitudes, on both the right and the left, and can be called “political tolerance.”

The EVS study shows that, in comparison to other European countries, Poland has extremely high levels of political tolerance, fairly high levels of ethnic tolerance, and relatively low levels of personal tolerance. The last decade saw a noticeable increase in the first two dimensions of tolerance and a decrease in the third.

Strangers as neighbors

One of the measures of intolerance can be a tendency to exclude as potential neighbors people belonging to different social categories, such as members of ethnic minorities.

In Poland, the most strongly rejected ethnic minority group turned out to be the Roma – designated as the least favorite neighbors by one-third of Poles. But they were and are less likely to be excluded in Poland than



The Russian-speaking minority in Warsaw has its own shops selling books and records

elsewhere in Europe. The reasons for the relatively lower level of intolerance of Roma may include their centuries-long presence in Poland and their comparatively small numbers. According to the newest EVS survey of degrees of rejection of potential neighbors, ranked below the Roma in Poland are, successively: Muslims, Jews, immigrants and people of another race. This indicates a still somewhat greater degree of exclusion of Jews in Poland than is the “European average.”

Only in the last decade has the degree of rejection of Roma and persons of different races subsided. The rejection of Jews increased in the 1990s, and it has only recently reverted to the level seen at the beginning of Poland’s transformation. Intolerance of Muslims increased between 1990 and 1999, but it did not worsen in the next decade.

Others in Europe

All the Western European regions now exhibit a similar level of neighborly tolerance towards other ethnic groups. Over the past decade, such tolerance visibly fell in Northern Europe (by nearly half in the Netherlands, for example), and rose in the south (in Greece and Spain). The level of personal tolerance rose noticeably in central western countries (in France, Belgium, Germany), and decreased in the north (especially in the Netherlands and in Denmark). Political tolerance has increased most noticeably in Southern Europe (in Greece and Spain), and it fell – albeit less dramatically – in the northern part (in Finland and the Netherlands).

In comparison to the situation a decade ago, the level of tolerance in various regions of Eastern Europe now looks different. In 1999, the Visegrad Group countries fared the worst in terms of tolerance within Eastern European countries. High rates of general

intolerance in this part of Europe resulted mainly from the xenophobic attitudes of this region’s inhabitants. The last edition of the EVS showed, however, a marked growth of tolerance within the societies of Central and Eastern Europe, especially among the Hungarians, who moved from being the society with the highest level of exclusion of other ethnic neighbors to being one of most tolerant European countries.

The overall level of tolerance is not much different in other regions of post-communist Europe (this was similar in 1999). Bigger differences may be observed when one looks closely at the various dimensions of tolerance. Interestingly, ethnic tolerance is lowest in the Baltic countries (especially Lithuania and Estonia), and highest in countries of the south (where personal and political tolerance is likewise high).

Overall the 2008 EVS shows Poland, viewed against all of Europe, to be just averagely tolerant of immigrants, even though it is one of the more open post-communist states. Even though Poland’s level of prejudice against immigrants and people of different races is slightly lower than the average in Europe, it is nevertheless higher than in Western countries.

Poles and immigrants

The EVS analysis of neighborly tolerance in Polish society showed a decrease of xenophobia against immigrants and persons of different races in the last decade. It should be noted that although the percentage of rejection of immigrants in Poland dropped in the last decade (from 23.5% to 17.5%), its current level is still higher than in the early 1990s (10%). The fact that, according to the 1990 EVS, Poles were actually the most tolerant nation in Eastern Europe, could be explained by: a wave of enthusiasm due to political

Polish attitudes towards ethnic minorities and immigrants

At the large markets in Poland, many people of different cultures and nationalities meet under one roof



Anna Zwardcka

transformation and the opening of Poland's borders, a kind of euphoria characteristic of a time of great change, interest in other cultures, the arrival of new immigrant groups to Poland, and a newfound appreciation for the issue of human rights protection.

In the late 1990s, Poles' initial openness to immigrants shifted to a closed attitude. The EVS study published in 1999 identified Poland as having one of the highest levels of xenophobia in Europe. Anxiety caused by a seemingly immense influx of immigrants, a pessimistic social mood resulting from the costs of the political transformations, the weakness of state institutions, the country's deteriorating economic situation, and rising unemployment all contributed to the radicalization of social, and especially ethnic, attitudes. Because of this, the Poles perceived the conflict of interest between their own society and that of foreigners much more sharply.

This situation began changing in the last decade. The change in ethnic attitudes revealed by the 2008 EVS studies may to a large extent be linked to Europeanization - namely, Poland's entry into the European Union. Taking into account both the previously described overall indicator of ethnic intolerance, as well as the more detailed measures of excluding immigrants as potential neighbors, we can say that, in light of the 2008 EVS study, Poles emerged as one of the less xenophobic nations of Eastern Europe.

Wanted: Immigrants for Hire

These changes in attitudes also clearly emerged in Poles' answers to questions about their attitude to the arrivals of immigrants and to their finding work in Poland (EVS 2008). In 1995, 44% of Poles were in favor of reducing the number of foreigners in Poland. Four years later, in response to a similar question, almost 13% of Polish citizens would have barred arrivals from less developed countries, while 58% postulated limiting the influx of foreigners (EVS 1999). However, a decade later (EVS 2008), Poles had become more receptive to the influx of foreigners. Only 3.5% of Polish citizens were completely against arrivals (only Denmark, Switzerland, Spain, and Finland had fewer citizens against foreigners coming to their country), and 16.2% were in favor of allowing people to emigrate from less developed countries for work without restriction.

A similar pattern was also noticeable in the case of employment of foreigners in Poland. In 1999 as many as 90% of Poles believed that, when jobs are in short supply, Poles should have priority over foreigners in obtaining employment - at the time, a stronger degree of discrimination against foreigners in the labor market was only found in Lithuania and Malta. A decade later, the number of those who felt that Poles should have preference in the Polish labor market was clearly lower, at 70.9% of respondents, making Poland, in this regard, one of the least discriminatory societies of Eastern Europe.

Additionally, other studies from the last decade point to an increase in the level of Poland's ethnic tolerance in recent years. These changes could already be detected in Western and Central European countries in 2002-2003 via the European Social Survey (ESS). In Poland, it showed a relatively low level of rejection of immigrants. Poles excelled in their own region; they were far ahead of the Czechs and Hungarians. Support for this conclusion can be found in a 2004 CBOS survey, in which only 14% of Poles were against the settlement of foreigners in Poland; 34% would have given all willing foreigners the opportunity to settle in Poland, and 43% would have at least allowed immigrants from certain countries. It should be noted, however, that the strongly predominant view among the respondents of the latter study was that Poland did not need a higher number of immigrants (82%).

The relatively high, visible openness of Poles towards immigrants in recent years can be explained not only by the positive social mood caused by, notably, economic growth, but also by the lack of a sense of threat associated with the relatively small number and the "unproblematic" nature of immigrants in Poland. EVS studies showed that, in Poland in 2008, the general feeling of the threat associated with the presence of immigrants was one of the lowest in Europe. Of all the threats listed, Poles were most worried that immigrants would burden the welfare system and that they would contribute to an increase in crime. Further, Polish citizens feared the demographic and economic (i.e. job loss) threats that the presence of immigrants could cause. Polish society's smallest concerns were those of cultural cohesion.

Analysis of the presented hierarchy of risks, along with the results of other studies, demonstrates the relative decline of the importance of economic factors for Poles in the last decade. Only in Romania, France, Denmark, and Albania were general concerns tied to the presence of immigrants lower than in Poland (EVS 2008). Immigrants in countries with a large influx of immigrants, especially in the last period, like Austria, Germany, Russia, Ireland, Greece, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, claimed the greatest feeling of threat.

Discussion of results

The EVS results showed that Poland stands out positively in Eastern Europe in terms of ethnic tolerance, which in the past decade has noticeably increased. In turn, the rise in tolerance towards neighboring ethnic minorities and immigrants may be tied to an increase in openness towards these groups as a result of the improvement of the economic situation and an increase in the level of social optimism in Poland, as well as Poland's succession to the European Union. The favorable factor here is the small number of immigrants in Poland and its resulting relatively small scale of problems, which contributes to the low level of insecurity among Poland's population due to the presence of "others." The relative openness to immigrants' arrivals and to their presence in the labor market is accompanied by a relative acceptance of ethnic otherness and the diversity of the Polish population. It seems that this is, above all, closely tied to the small scale of immigration and the specificity of Poland, which is not experiencing such deep cultural changes and conflicts as Western societies. ■

Further reading:

- Grzymała-Kazłowska A. (2011). Paradoxy polskiej tolerancji. Postawy wobec mniejszości i imigrantów w Polsce na tle Europy [Polish paradoxes of tolerance - Attitudes towards minorities and immigrants in Poland and Europe]. In: A. Jasińska-Kania (ed.), *Wartości i zmiany. Przemiany wartości Polaków w jednoczącej się Europie [Values and change - Transformation of Poles' values in a uniting Europe]*. Warsaw: Scholar.
- Jasińska-Kania A., Łodziński S. (eds.). (2009). *Obszary i formy wykluczenia etnicznego w Polsce [Areas and forms of ethnic exclusion in Poland]*. Warsaw: Scholar.



Rabbi Pinchas Żarczyński conducts a lecture within the framework of the project „Multicultural Lublin” (2009), which presented the culture of national and religious minorities