

Poland (Polska)

Poland is the largest of the ten countries that joined the EU on 1 May 2004, with a population of thirty-eight million people. It is a central European country which has land borders with Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania and the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad. The national language is Polish, although because Poland's borders have changed over many centuries, it also has small German, Lithuanian, Ukrainian and Jewish populations. Having experienced forty years of Communist government, Poland has undergone massive transformation in recent years in order to win the acceptance of western European states and the EU.

Recent History

At the end of World War II, a Communist government was established in Poland within the Soviet area of influence known as the Warsaw Pact. When Communism collapsed in the late 1980s, the Polish people rejected the authoritarian regime and elected a democratic government in 1990. The following decade was marked by the rapid transformation of Poland into a functioning democracy and strong market economy. This process was not without pain. While the Communist regimes had guaranteed work for all, in a free market economy unemployment rose significantly.

Since the end of Communism, Polish democracy has developed rapidly despite some difficulties. Power has moved between the left and the right, and the make up of the political parties has changed several times. In 2005, the Polish people elected a new government and a new President, marking a move back to the right after several years of left-of-centre government. Poland has pursued an independent line on foreign policy, most notably in its support for the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Government Structure

Poland is a parliamentary republic. Most executive power rests with the Prime Minister and his Council of Ministers. The President's role is primarily ceremonial, although he does have the power to *veto* laws.

The government, elected in 2007, is led by Prime Minister Donald Tusk of the Civic Platform (PO) party. He leads a coalition government with the Polish People's Party (PSL). The governing coalition was re-elected in October 2011, and Tusk became the first Polish Prime Minister to serve a second term since the fall of communism.

The current President, Bronislaw Komorowski of the Civic Platform party, was elected in July 2010 after his predecessor, Lech Kaczyński of the Law and Justice Party (PiS), was killed in a plane crash in April 2010.

The Polish Parliament has two chambers – the Sejm and the Senate. The Sejm, which is elected by *proportional representation*, has most lawmaking power. Poland carried out a constitutional reform in 2001 to change the way in which it elects MPs.

At a local level, Poland is divided into sixteen provinces each of which has its own directly elected legislature.

Poland and the EU

Poland's membership of the EU marked a significant point in its shift from a Communist dictatorship to an open market democracy. Like many of the other former Communist countries that joined the EU in 2004, membership was the climax of many years of reform. Along with Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, Poland had pursued EU membership through the Visegrád Group since 1991 and was accepted for *accession talks* in 1997. In 1999, Poland moved closer to western Europe when it became a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). EU membership finally arrived on 1 May 2004, when Poland became one of the largest member states of the EU.

Since accession, Poland has staked out a distinctive position for itself in EU politics. Most recently, following the 2009 European Parliament elections, the PiS changed allegiances in the EP by joining the European Conservatives and Reformists, a new right-wing Eurosceptic group. This caused controversy as the PiS politicians had been criticised for holding far-right conservative views. As a supporter of the Iraq War, Poland went against the majority of EU member states that opposed the intervention. The Polish government has also been willing to take on the EU institutions. During the negotiations for the 2007-13 budget deal, Poland threatened to use its veto if subsidies to new member states were cut. As part of their membership agreement, Poland is committed to joining the Euro, although no date for entry has yet been set. Polish people have also benefited from free movement across some national borders, although this right was withheld by many existing EU member states in 2004 because of fear of a flood of eastern European workers to the west.

Facts and Figures

- Many state-owned Polish companies have been privatised since the end of Communism, the largest being Polish Telecom.
- Poland's unemployment rate in 2010 was 11.8% (the 7th highest in the EU). This was an improvement from 2007 when it had the 2nd highest EU unemployment rate.
- Poland's principle exports include clothes, cars, chemicals, defence equipment and agricultural produce.

Technical Terms

Veto: The right of one country to block a decision.

Proportional Representation: electoral system where the overall number of votes determines the distribution of seats.

Accession talks: process of negotiation between applicants and the EU that can lead to membership.

Links

- <http://poland.pl/>
- <http://www.premier.gov.pl/en/>