

Social values recognized by Poles in a European context

Poles' Values



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The social values professed by Poles are more traditional than in more affluent European countries, yet have been changing over the past two decades

The twentieth anniversary of Poland's political transformation and the fifth anniversary of its EU accession mark a convenient opportunity to pose questions about how the Polish value system has changed over that period, and about the similarities and differences between these Polish values and those of societies in other countries.

European Values Study

Answers to those questions may be found by referring to data from an international comparative analysis of European values, the *European Values Study* (EVS). The first

such research was carried out in 1981 in ten countries, and since then it has been repeated every decade or so; it included 26 European countries in 1990, 32 countries in 1999, and 46 countries in 2008. The analysis has also been expanded globally to produce the *World Values Survey* (WVS). In Poland the study has been carried out three times: in 1990, 1999, and 2008. A common, comparable questionnaire given to representative population samples in a few dozen countries provides an opportunity to analyze the diversity of societal values and social norms, and their changes over time. The questionnaire encompasses a broad range of issues: from values concerning work and family life, through religious, political and economic values, to issues of private and civic morality as well as questions of identity on a local, regional, national, European and global scale.

One of the key results of the EVS has been to highlight the diversity in Europeans' values, although certain regularities and trends in changes are also notable. Explaining value transitions in European societies, including in Poland, requires that they be considered



Patrycja Dolowy

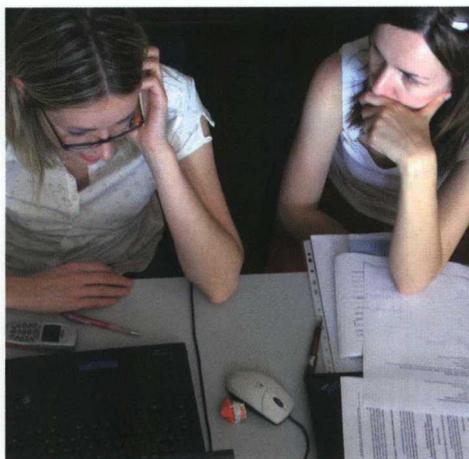
Within the hierarchy of values regarded as the most important, Poland - alongside the rest of the world - places family firmly at the top

in the context of processes of different temporal and geographical scopes. Processes of global civilization, driven by the spread of Western European standards of modernism and rationalism, underlie the first type of value changes. The second type results from historical processes that have been influencing cultural variance in European countries for centuries, and which are bound to religious divisions. Political transformations, giving rise to distinct historical experiences of societies in different parts of Europe during the 20th century, are responsible for the third type of changes. The fourth is caused by the process of European integration.

The processes of globalization, modernization, and postmodern development have led to an undermining of the authority of traditional institutions, especially religious ones, as well as to the pluralization of worldviews, and the secularization and individualization of values. Individualization indicates growing recognition of the autonomy of individuals who independently select their own values and norms of behavior, guided by self-interest and preferences, as well as acknowledging others' right to make such choices. According to the theory of Ronald Inglehart, director of the WVS project, one can anticipate two trends in value changes. The first includes changes on the traditional vs. secular-rational values dimension: a shift from emphasis on obedience to traditional institutions and authorities, especially religious ones, and adherence to family obligations, as well as identification with one's own nation, and national pride, in favor of a secular worldview emphasizing individual achievements, effectiveness and independence, and democratic participation in political life in which authority is legitimated by rational-legal norms. The second trend is a movement away from material values, associated with the need for survival and the need for physical and economic security, to post-materialist values reflecting the need for self-achievement and self-expression, and emphasizing the quality of life, as well as the spiritual aspects of religious belief.

Sources of differences

To a large degree, results of the EVS and WVS studies confirm these predictions. The greatest degree of acceptance of both secular/



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rational and post-materialist/individualist values occurs in countries with the highest level of socioeconomic development, including Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, Finland, Switzerland, Austria, France, and Belgium. A shift towards post-materialist values occurred between 1990–2000, and they now dominate in the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Scandinavian and Western European countries.

However, regardless of the level of economic development, wealth, and modernization, the values professed by individual nations are influenced by regional variations, by their distinct cultural and especially religious traditions, as well as by their historical experiences. Protestant countries show the greatest acceptance of individualist, secular/rational and post-materialist values, as well as cultural openness and tolerant attitudes towards deviations from the norm within private life, sexuality, and interpersonal relationships. Such attitudes are more rarely encountered in and slower to reach the Catholic countries of the European Union. It is noteworthy that the highest indicators of traditional family values, religious belief, and national pride can be found in countries located on the outskirts of Europe (apart from Poland also in Malta, Portugal, Ireland, Greece, and Romania) – countries deprived of their own states while other contemporary nations were being formed, where the shaping of national characteristics intertwined with their religious identities.

Family-oriented Poland

The values recognized by Poles are more traditional than those prevailing in the most

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affluent Western European nations. Poland has also exhibited a distinct dominance of material values over post-materialist ones, a phenomenon that increased during the 1990s, when security and internal public order were in greatest demand. However, data from 2005 and 2008 show a decrease in these values and an increase in the importance of the post-materialist ideals of political freedom and freedom of speech.

Within the hierarchy of values regarded as the most important, Poland, alongside other countries, places family firmly at the top. In 2000, family was ranked as extremely important by 84% of Europeans and 92% of Poles; this latter percentage dropped to 87% in 2008. The majority of Poles recognize a traditional family model centered around a stable, long-term marriage, where having children is considered to be key, and they attach particular value to the maternal roles played by women. Both parents are expected to make sacrifices for the sake of their children, and children to show unconditional respect for their parents. However, demographic studies indicate an increase in the number of cohabiting couples, growth in the number of divorces, more children being born outside marriage, more couples delaying marriage and having children, and fewer children being born into middle-class families, as well as more unstable relationships, single mothers, and children being abandoned (especially within poorer classes).

The traditional models generally cherished by Poles are not keeping apace with accommodating the pragmatic demands of everyday life. Results from 2008 demonstrate an erosion in the acceptance of traditional values: increasing acceptance of the opinion that marriage is outdated (6% in 1990, 9% in 1999, 18% in 2008) and that a woman need not have a child to feel fulfilled (25% in 1990, 29% in 1999, 44% in 2008). In addition, the importance assigned to non-family relationships (with acquaintances and friends) has also increased in Poland (19% in 1990, 28% in 1999, 38% in 2008); this value is now approaching European indices, which had been much higher in the past.

Diligent Poles

Work takes second place among especially highly regarded values. The proportion of



Poles indicating that work is extremely important in their lives (66% in 1990) was significantly higher than the European average (57%). However, this value has been changing markedly under the influence of the economic and employment situation. A decade ago, during a period of high unemployment, the proportion of Poles regarding work as extremely important (79% in 1999) was the highest in Europe, while recently it has been closer to the European average (56% in 2008). The significance placed on free time in Poland is now also approaching European levels, although in the previous decade all other Europeans had regarded it more highly. Despite attaching high importance to work, Poles report less job-satisfaction than Western Europeans and feel a lesser degree of freedom in decision-

95% of Poles declare themselves religious believers and yet Polish society is becoming increasingly secularized, as demonstrated by the increasing tolerance towards conduct condemned by the Church, such as divorce and euthanasia

making about work. Poles therefore regard work as important in itself, but what they chiefly sense as having an impact on their everyday life are its instrumental aspects: good earnings and stability of employment.

Religion and politics

The importance attached to religious values is another feature distinguishing Poles from other Europeans. Alongside Malta, Romania, Greece and Ireland, Poland has the highest indicator of religious belief in Europe (95%). However, secularization is shown by the falling proportion of Poles indicating religion as very important in their lives – from 51% in 1990 (against the European average of 23%) to 45% in 1999 and 31% in 2008. It is also confirmed by the growing acceptance of conduct condemned by the Church (divorce, abortion, euthanasia), and the high proportion of people stating that the Church does not provide appropriate solutions to social and political problems (61%) and rejecting the involvement of the Church in political life (over 80%). In Poland, religious practices are regarded as formal, solemn, and festive, and are celebrated as symbols of national unity, further maintained by the authority of the Church. On the other hand, religious practices are ritualized on a day-to-day basis, and the selective choice of religious dogmas is being adapted to individual needs.

Politics plays a relatively minor and diminishing role in the lives of Poles. A comparison of EVS results from 1990, 1999 and 2008 indicates a decrease in indicators of political engagement and interest in Poland, whereas Western European countries showed a higher level of interest in politics during that time. The democratic political system is appreciated by most Poles. The percentage of Polish citizens regarding it as a very good or quite good system has dropped over the past decade (from 85% in 1999 to 76% in 2008), as has the opinion that despite certain problems democracy is preferable to other forms of government (from 90% to 81%). At the same time fewer people were of the opinion that democracy entails too many arguments and not enough decisions, and that the democratic system does not cope well with keeping-order. Assessments of

democracy's performance have seen quite significant fluctuation: although 57% expressed their dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy in Poland in 1999, those satisfied became predominant in 2008 (at 54%). Nevertheless, even those dissatisfied with democracy's performance were convinced of the stability of the democratic system in Poland.

National vs. local identity

A sense of national pride placed Poles at the forefront of European countries covered by the EVS research: the proportion of those who expressed pride in their Polishness was over 95%. Although the level of national pride was equally high in Portugal, Malta and Ireland, it was significantly lower among Poland's neighbors: the Germans, Lithuanians, Czechs, Slovaks, Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Russians. However, a com-

Poles are convinced that Poland's EU membership will help preserve a sense of national identity and culture

parison of data from 1990–2008 shows the appearance of an opposing trend: a diminishing sense of national identification among Poles (from 45% down to 19%), being replaced by a sense of local-community attachment. Almost half of Europeans, and two-thirds of Poles, list the sense of belonging to locality where they live as most important to them. A feeling of national identity remains important to Europeans, despite weakening in some countries. However, identification with Europe remains surprisingly low – not exceeding a few percent and remaining steady for the past 20 years. Nevertheless, the majority of Europeans approve of their countries' membership in the European Union. Poles feel that EU membership has given them a sense of opening onto the world, and greater freedom. ■

Further reading:

- Inglehart R., Basanez M., Diez-Medrano J., Halman L., Luijckx R. (2004). *Human Beliefs and Values: a cross-cultural sourcebook based on the 1999–2002 values surveys*. Mexico: Siglo XXI Editores.
- Jasińska-Kania A. (Guest editor). (2005–2006). Changing Identities of Europeans. *International Journal of Sociology*, 35, 4.