

Poland (Polska)

Poland is the largest of the 10 countries that joined the EU on 1 May 2004, with a population of 38 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 40 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. However, the government collapsed after a vote of no confidence in August 2007. An early election was held in October 2007 and won by the centre-right Civic Platform Party. 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 current President, Lech Kaczyński, is a member of the Law and Justice Party (PiS). The 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. The government elected in 2007 is a coalition led by Prime Minister Donald Tusk of the centre-right Civic Platform Party, and the Polish Peasants' Party. At a local level, Poland is divided into 16 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 in EU politics. 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 negotiations for the 2007-13 budget, Poland threatened to use its veto if subsidies to new member states were cut. As part of their membership agreement, Poland committed to joining the Euro, although no date for entry has yet been set. In December 2007, Poland joined the Schengen Area, allowing free movement across national borders. This right had been withheld by many EU member states in 2004 because of fear of a flood of eastern European workers to the west.

In 2008 Poland's ratification of the Lisbon Treaty proved contentious. Whilst Poland's parliament ratified the Treaty in April, President Kaczyński, who must formalise the ratification, declared the Treaty 'dead' after Ireland rejected it in a referendum in June 2008.

Facts and Figures

- Many state-owned Polish companies have been privatised since the end of Communism, the largest being Polish Telecom.
- The unemployment rate of Poland in 2007 was the second highest in the EU at 9.7% of the population.
- 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/english/>