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SELECTED ISSUES OF POLAND'S DEMOGRAPHIC (IN)SECURITY

Abstract. Poland's current and future situation results from a combination of several factors. One of the key factors is individual and social human resources. Demographic capital is a fundamental value that underpins many strategic aspects of a state's development. In the case of Poland, our demographic resources in 2025 are still large. Nevertheless, due to a very low birth rate, the nation's future in the area of human resources is going to look bleaker, or even catastrophic, perhaps. Demographic changes are taking place in several areas, heavily impacting security issues, particularly military and economic security. This is also already partly visible in primary, secondary and higher education, among others. This article attempts to outline several selected problems in this area.

Keywords: Poland; social sciences; demography; security

INTRODUCTION

A country's population is one of its fundamental and essential elements; therefore, demographic trends are the subject of multidimensional analyses. It is a fundamental issue from the perspective of state developmental strategy, including its social, economic and military condition. After World War II, demographic processes in Poland were clearly beneficial. Despite the unfavorable economic situation, fertility and birth rates were high. This period clearly contradicts the claim that material conditions have the greatest impact on demographic processes. Showing marital and family life as a positive value – the underpinnings of individual and social development – seems to be of far greater importance (Gizicka, 2024).

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This article give a synthetic account of some opportunities and challenges concerning Poland's demographics. The research questions hinge on two issues: 1. How did the demographic trends develop in the last decade? 2. What are and will be the consequences of these trends?

1. THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

The issue of demographic changes and prospects in Poland is definitely multifaceted. However, authors addressing these issues generally agree that Poland is experiencing a serious demographic crisis that calls for decisive systemic action. This fact cannot be ignored, as future ramifications will be multiplied if no concrete action has been taken.

During World War II, Poland suffered huge losses in human lives. There were over six million deaths, amounting to over 20% of the country's population at that time. In 1945, Poland's population was estimated to be around twenty-four million people. However, the next few years did bring demographic growth. The 1950s were, in fact, a time of particularly high birth rates, as were the late 1970s and early 1980s. During those periods, the number of births in a single year was over 700 thousand (1950, 1957 and 1983). A new perspective on demographic issues emerged during systemic changes after 1989 (Churski and Kaczmarek, 2022).

Table 1. Poland's basic demographics

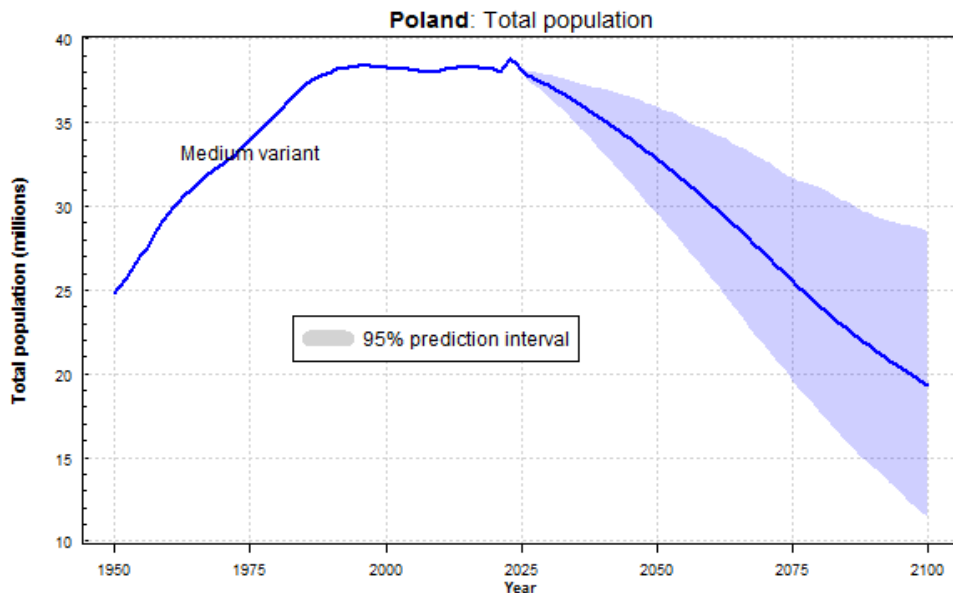
Years	Population (millions)	Births	Deaths	Fertility rate
1950	25	763,000	289,000	3.7
1974	33.7	623,700	280,000	2.26
2000	38.3	378,300	368,000	1.37
2024	37.5	252,000	408,500	1.09

Note. Own study based on Statistics Poland (2024).

Looking at the current perspective (Statistics Poland, 2024), Poland is a country with a still relatively high population (Table 1), 37.5 million in 2024. This is a huge security asset, given Poland's geopolitical location between Germany and Russia. Poland borders seven countries, including unstable ones (like Ukraine) or even hostile (like Belarus and Russia). This is also related to

the fact that the EU and NATO have long external borders in Poland, making it a frontline state on NATO's so-called eastern flank. Being aware of the ongoing war in Ukraine and Russia's aggressive policy, including the latter's plans for possible further military actions, Poland must constantly strive to develop its defense potential. Citizens willing and capable of defending their homeland are the basic criterion in this respect. Plans to further develop Poland's armed forces assume an increase in the number of military personnel to almost 500 thousand over the next 15–20 years. This is a serious challenge in the context of current demographic trends.

Figure 1. Demographic forecasts for Poland

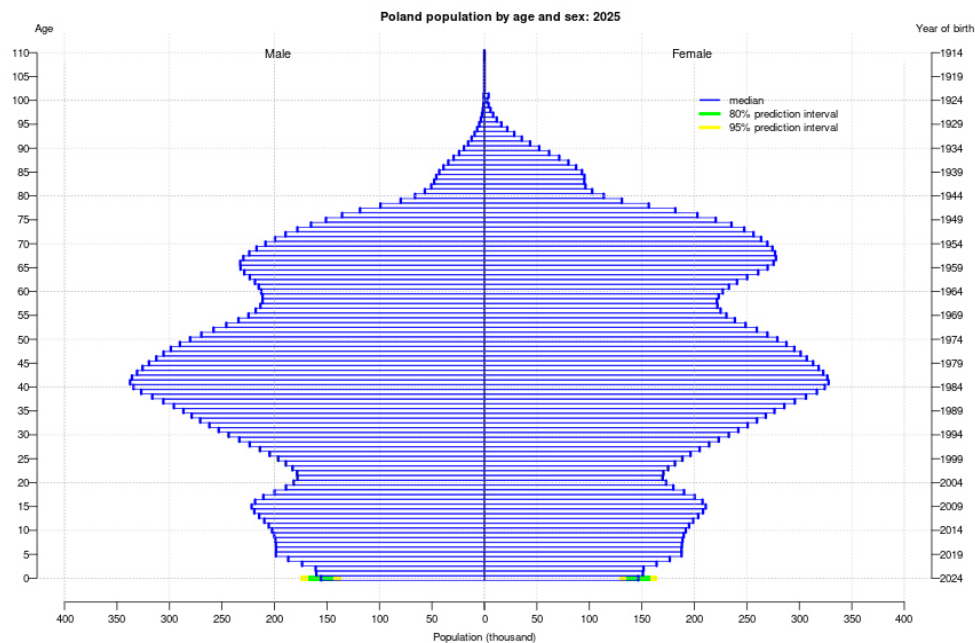


Note. Based on the UN data (WPP, 2024).

For several years, the process of depopulation has become a definite challenge for Poland, and it has evolved into a threat. It is related to a dramatically low fertility rate with a concomitant increase in deaths. The fertility rate fell below 2 in 1990 and has been decreasing almost constantly ever since, so Poland's demographic balance is negative at the moment. The fertility rate was 1.09 births per woman in 2024, one of the worst figures in Europe. According to Eurostat data, Poland ranks fourth from the bottom among European countries in terms of fertility rate. Only three European countries had a lower fertility rate in 2024: Malta, Lithuania and Spain (see ec.europa.eu/eurostat). In addition, the society

is ageing, and demographic prospects for the end of the 21st century (Figure 1) are overwhelming. UN forecasts indicate that Poland's population may fall to around 20 million people by then.

Figure 2. Poland's age pyramid



Note. Based on United Nations Organization (2024).

The key role in the analyzed processes, including the state's socio-economic dynamics and its resilience and defense, is played by the social structure. Such predicted demographic processes will definitely change the Polish society (Figure 2). Demographic values in a given country generally depend on two factors: the balance between births and deaths and external migration. Since the birth rate is dramatically low and this situation is not really improving, it should be assumed that it will be similar in the future. If procreation plans in Poland do not change and there is no increase in births, the country will have to open to migration. This will cause ethnic and social changes, and consequently also the way the state will be managed and organized, including in the area of defense (Gizicki, 2024).

Yet, this situation will not improve even with migration from the closest neighbors, such as Belarus or Ukraine. Being too welcoming to them may exacerbate social divisions through the revival of reciprocal prejudices resulting from our recent history, especially the times of World War II. Poland is totally unprepared for widespread migration, following the example of Great Britain or the Scandinavian countries. Moreover, this is not justified by our history and the present reality. Poland was not a colonial state and the population structure has almost been uniform. In the 2021 census, over 96.3% of its inhabitants reported Polish nationality.

The most desirable form of a migration policy for Poland would be actions aimed at Poles living abroad so that they may return, especially those who left the country after we entered the EU in 2004. In many cases, migrants had several children at that time. Additionally, in some cases, it would be possible to welcome the descendants of Poles who were deported or expelled from Poland during, for example, World War II. Repatriation, apart from its social significance, would be an important step to fulfill historical justice. The potential of the Polish diaspora is considerable.

The rate of migration in Poland has recently been intensified by two factors:

1. The war in Ukraine. In this case, the number of war refugees flowing into Poland was unprecedented. Statistical data show that over 7.5 million Ukrainians crossed into Poland; in 2024, there were almost 1 million registered Ukrainian citizens in Poland (UNHCR data).

2. The hybrid conflict on the border with Belarus. In this case, the Lukashenko regime is stepping up illegal migration. Dozens of illegal attempts to cross the Polish-Belarussian border are recorded daily.

Economic development is crucial for a state's strategic position. During Poland's transformation after 1989, the country struggled with huge economic problems. In the last 20 years (following our accession to the EU), Poland's economy took various paths of development. Currently, basic macroeconomic indicators generally show constant economic growth. For most of this time, Poland was Europe's leader in economic changes. This has definitely translated into increased opportunities for foreign investors. In the internal market, the standard of living has increased and employment conditions have improved, leading to the emergence of the so-called employee market. The standard of living of families, especially those with many children, was further enhanced by a special benefit introduced in 2016, the so-called 500+ program (upgraded in 2024 to 800+ zlotys per month). Although this did not directly translate into an increase in birth rate, it did bring an increase, among others, in the quality of child upbringing and education (Hrynkiewicz, Witkowski, and Potrykowska, 2018).

Poland now faces major demographic challenges (Andrzejewski, 2024; Łakomy, 2024; Marczuk and Kot, 2025; Resolution no. 224). The ageing population is putting larger strain on the health and social care systems for senior citizens, so they need better support (Paplicki et al., 2018). Early prevention of lifestyle diseases, including oncological and vascular diseases, is extremely important. The professions of the future are increasingly becoming those dedicated to people of retirement age.

Table 2. Selected macroeconomic indicators in Poland

Years	GDP growth (%)	Inflation	Unemployment rate
2004	5.7	3.5	19.1
2010	3.8	2.6	12.4
2015	3.6	-0.9	9.7
2020	2.2	3.4	6.2
2024	2.9	3.6	5.1

Note. Own study based on Statistics Poland (2024).

Generally speaking, positive macroeconomic indicators is just one criterion of economic development (Table 2). In the case of Poland, its economy and the development opportunities of individual sectors (e.g. energy resources), its technological potential and large investments are also of fundamental importance. There are significant differences in this area related to EU policy and individual political formations in Poland. In some cases, solutions that are forced are definitely unfavorable for current and future generations. In addition, they undermine the state's security and its strategic, independent development. Moreover, maintaining high macroeconomic indicators depends to a large extent on human resources.

Table 3. Number of students and teachers in schools in Poland

Years	Students (millions)	Teachers (millions)
2010	5.6	0.66
2015	5.1	0.68
2020	4.9	0.69
2024	5.0	0.74

Note. Own study based on Statistics Poland (2024).

The unfavorable birth rate trends are beginning to show in Polish primary and secondary schools (Table 3). Some local governments, which supervise educational institutions in their area, have decided to close or merge schools, by reason of the very small number of children in individual age groups. Another problem in this respect is the maximum allowed number of students in classes. Quite often, at the primary level, it is even as high as 29 children in a classroom, and at the secondary level 34 students per class. The number of students participating in so-called home-schooling education is growing, which was 58 thousand in 2024, an increase compared to the previous year by about 4 thousand students (Statistics Poland, 2024). After 2022, the number of students from Ukraine rose steadily. Educational institutions in Poland accommodated almost 175 thousand such students in 2024. Some of them were also admitted to uniformed classes, educating for the needs of security services and institutions, which raised some doubts in certain circles.

A serious challenge for the Poland's education system is the growing number of teachers, which is not due to the demographic needs related to students, but the age of teachers working in Poland. There is a shortage of young teachers under 30, who constitute only 5% of teachers, and the number of teachers older than 50 already exceeds 36%. The problem with younger people taking up employment is, on the one hand, the relatively low wages, and on the other, the declining prestige of this profession. The education system has been expanded to include teachers with pension rights, especially in the area of science and vocational subjects. This situation is pronounced in western Poland, where the teaching profession is predominantly female (over 82% of the staff are women).

CONCLUSION

The demographic challenges outlined in Poland necessitate rapid and systemic actions. Such measures are of strategic importance, both now and in the near future. Their effectiveness and efficiency will determine Poland's development opportunities in the coming decades.

Undoubtedly, fostering procreative attitudes is of utmost importance. However, changing the public mindset in this respect is a formidable challenge given the general attitude to having offspring in a consumeristic society. We must consider the ever-growing expectations of the institution of marriage and family planning among young people, and how they will actually accomplish these goals. This requires the support of state, family-friendly policies, and especially stability in terms of housing availability, the labor market and development prospects.

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(NIE)BEZPIECZEŃSTWO DEMOGRAFICZNE POLSKI.
WYBRANE PROBLEMY

Streszczenie

Obecna i przyszła pozycja państwa jest wynikiem kilku czynników. Jednym z kluczowych są indywidualne i społeczne zasoby ludzkie. Kapitał demograficzny jest podstawową wartością, która wpływa na wiele strategicznych aspektów rozwoju danego państwa. W przypadku Polski zasoby demograficzne w 2025 r. są nadal duże. Niemniej jednak ze względu na bardzo niski wskaźnik urodzeń, przyszłość państwa w tym względzie będzie gorsza, a może nawet katastrofalna. Zmiany demograficzne zachodzą w kilku obszarach, wywierając znaczący wpływ na kwestie związane z bezpieczeństwem, w tym szczególnie bezpieczeństwo militarne i gospodarcze. Jest to już częściowo widoczne między innymi na poziomie szkolnictwa podstawowego, średniego i wyższego. W niniejszym artykule podjęto próbę nakreślenia kilku wybranych problemów w tym obszarze.

Słowa kluczowe: Polska; nauki społeczne; demografia; bezpieczeństwo