

# Intercultural Trends and Social Changes in Poland

Konrad PEDZIWIATR

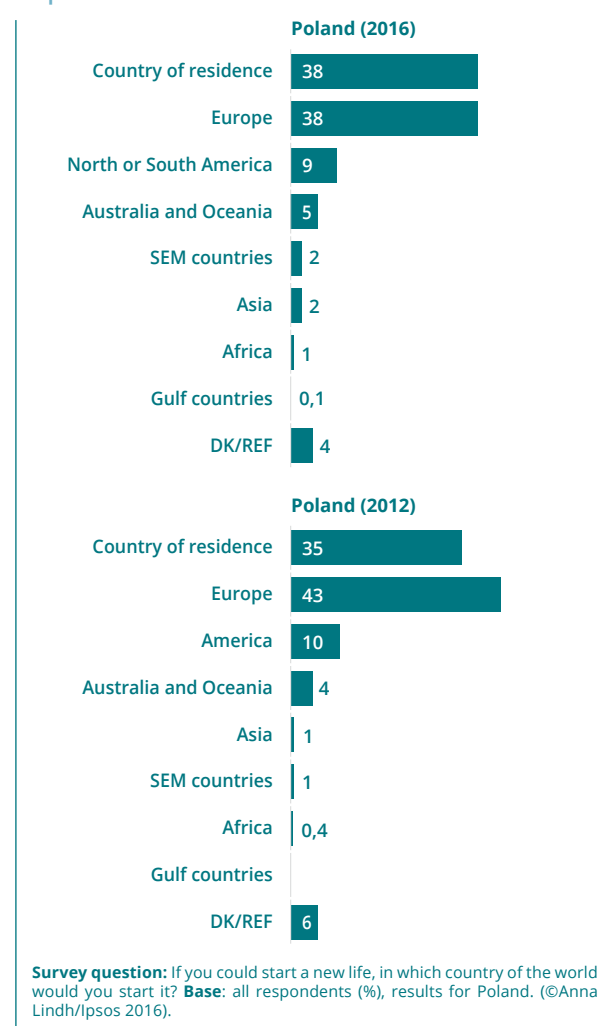
Konrad Pędziwiatr offers a sweeping shot of Polish society with the background of the findings of the Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey and the societal transformations in Poland since the collapse of communism. Through his presentation the author explores the changes and consistencies in the values of the Polish people, their perception and interest in the Euro-Mediterranean space, and the extent of their cross-cultural encounters with people from different backgrounds.

Since the collapse of communism in 1989 and then accession to the European Union in 2004, Poland has been undergoing deep social, political and economic transformations. In spite of rapid modernisation that has resulted inter alia in a significant increase in the number of people entering institutions of tertiary education (Polish Gross Enrolment Index was below 10% in 1990 and increased to above 40% in 2016 - MNiSW, 2016), rising living standards and life expectancy (from 70 years in 1990 to almost 78 in 2016 - GUS, 2016b), Poland still remains quite a religious country where almost 43% of adults regularly participate in religious services (Czapiński & Panek, 2015). While the number of churchgoers has been steadily decreasing since the beginning of the systemic transformations, when around 50% of the population participated regularly in the religious services (Czapiński & Panek, 2015; ISKK, 2015), the pace of the secularisation processes has been rather slow (especially in comparison with Western European countries – Davie, 2002) and the latest research shows that it may be even reversing. One of the recent large scale quantitative studies actually showed that the number of regular churchgoers had increased from 41% in 2011 to almost 43% in 2015 (Czapiński & Panek, 2015). Thus, sociological predictions suggesting the decline of religion with the advance of modernity (e.g. Berger, 1967) have not been fulfilled in a country with a very ethnically and religiously homogenous population (especially in comparison to Poland before the Second World War), and where the Catholic Church plays an important role in the country's public sphere (Pędziwiatr, 2015).

Rapid modernisation has not been the only important process to have shaped Polish society over the last decades – the outflow of surplus manpower after the insurmountable barriers to mobility in Europe were dismantled with the collapse of the Berlin Wall (Okólski, 2007) has also been significant. The migration process noticeably accelerated when Poland joined the EU with

some countries (e.g. UK and Ireland) opening their labour market for the citizens of new member states. According to the last census carried out in 2011, over 2 million of 38 million Polish citizens had been living

**Chart 20.1**  
Preferred countries to start a new life for respondents in Poland



abroad for at least 3 months (GUS, 2013). Although the pace of migration has been losing its dynamism in recent years, as the modernization of the economy has started to generate a steady demand for foreign labour, Poland is still a emigration rather than immigration country.

The Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey interestingly shows that while in 2012 35% of Polish interviewees saw their country as a preferred place to start a new life and 43% of them opted for Europe, in 2016 this situation changed. At present an equal number of people see Poland and Western European countries as a preferable birthplace (Chart 20.1). This trend has been clearly linked with the weakening labour market pressures pushing people out of the country (e.g. decreasing unemployment rates from over 20% in 2002 to around 8.5% at present - GUS, 2017b) and growth of the country's GDP (from 7,500 Euro per inhabitant in 2005 to 11,200 in 2016 – GUS, 2017c) that translates into a general improvement of the economic status of Polish families.

### Key values and perception of gender equality

In spite of the dynamic transformations, the key values of Polish society remain quite stable. The European Value Survey shows that Poles continuously point to family, then work, then religion as the most important values (Jasińska-Kania, 2012). Although the majority of Poles accept the traditional model of family, recent studies suggest an increasing acceptance of divorces, couples living together without marriage, patchwork families, usage of contraception and sex before marriage (CBOS, 2013b; Slany, 2007). The Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey shows that family solidarity is one of the key values that Poles would like to imbed in their children. This value was pointed out as the most or second most important value by 59% of Poles in 2012 and 57% in 2016. Also highly valued are respect for other cultures and independence (47% and 33% interviewees respectively mentioned them as most or second most important values) (Chart 20.2).

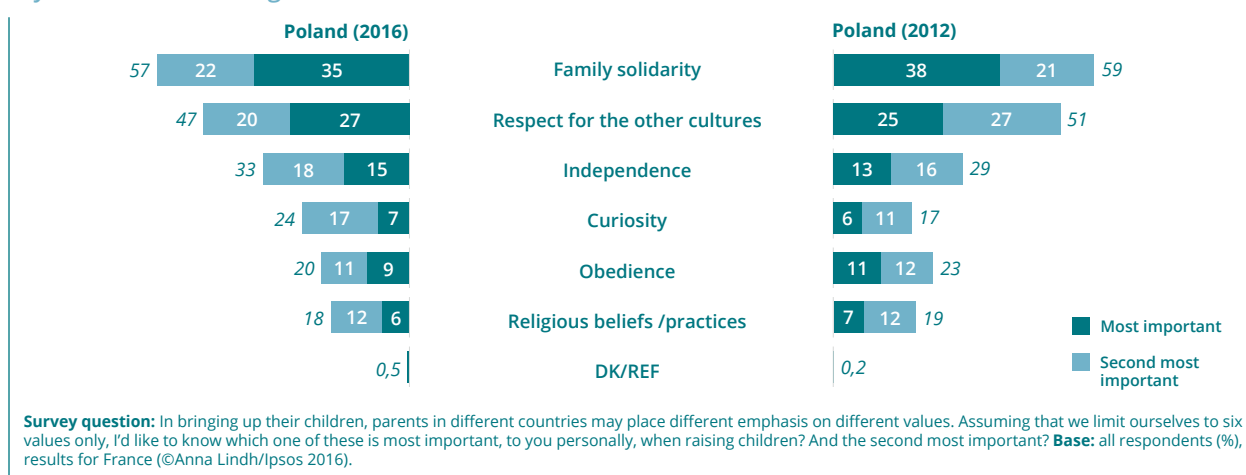
The strength of the traditional model of the family in the country is also visible in the Survey's data on the perception of a women's role in the society. The majority of the citizens believe that women already play an important role in the economic and business life, cultural and social life and in political-decision making. In contrast to other European countries, only a minority of 38-39% claimed that women should be playing a greater role in the aforementioned spheres of life. The survey carried out in 2013 by the Polish research centre found that the majority of men and the minority of women believed that there was equality of rights between men and women in public life and labour market (CBOS, 2013a).

### Perception and interest in the SEM region

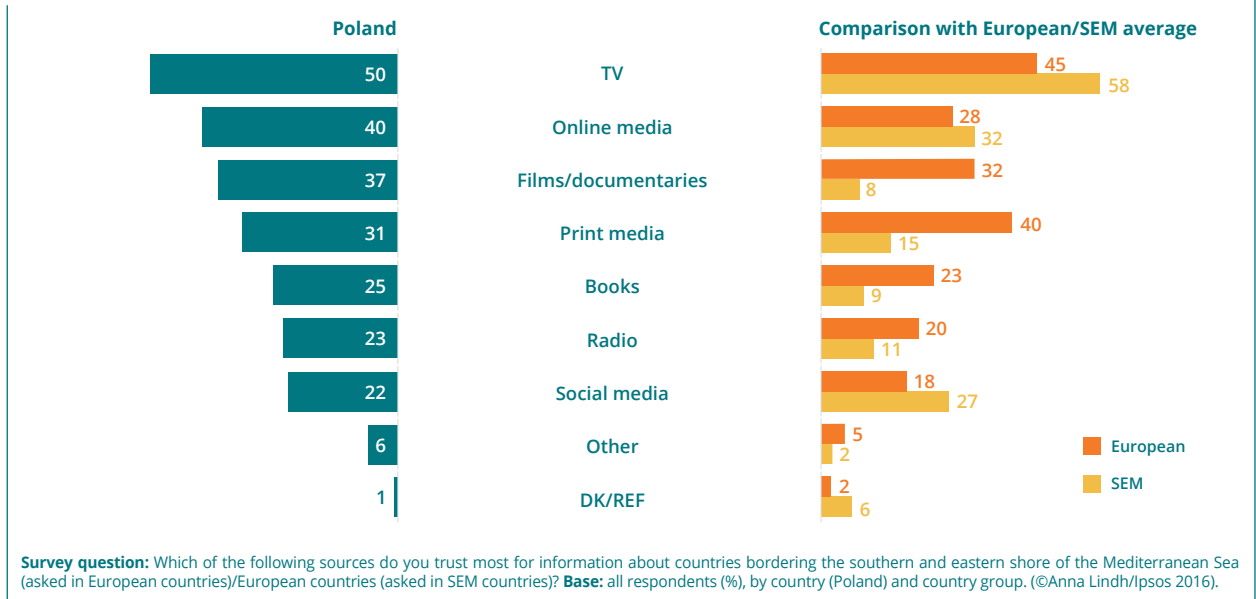
The perception the Mediterranean region by Polish society has been quite stable and not too distant from the views of other European countries surveyed. Most commonly, the Poles see the region through the perspective of a Mediterranean way of life and food, hospitality and common cultural heritage and history. These are also the main characteristics pointed out by other European countries and respondents of SEM countries. Less widespread were perceptions of the region as being a source of conflict, instability and resistance to change. As far as the main changes over the course of the last 2 years in the perception of the region are concerned, in 2016 there were around 10% less Poles who claimed that a specific way of life and food as well as hospitality strongly characterised the region compared to 2012.

At the end of 2016 more people viewed the region through the prism of migration issues (a new category in the poll) than through the lens of hospitality. Although the migration crisis has not directly influence Poland – as the country has served neither as a transit space nor as destination for increased migratory mobility from MENA to Europe – more Poles than other

**Chart 20.2** Key values when raising children in Poland



**Chart 20.3** Most trusted media sources for cross-cultural reporting in Poland



European countries surveyed said that this feature strongly characterised the region. At the same time, it is worth recalling that in the last 2 decades Poland has significantly contributed to EU mobility with over 2 million of its own citizens searching for work and better living conditions outside of the country (GUS, 2016a). This kind of perception of the SEM region, as I argue elsewhere, has been strongly linked with the politicisation and mediatisation of the migration crisis during the Polish parliamentary elections in 2015 and in their aftermath (Pędziwiatr, 2016, 2017). The result of it has been inter alia a significant overestimation of the number of Muslims living in the country. While all the EU societies analysed in the Ipsos MORI study on Perils of Perceptions overestimate the number of Muslims in their countries (e.g. in Italy 6 times more than the actual size, in France almost 5 times more and Belgium 4 times more), it is the Poles who are the unquestionable champions of such overestimations in Europe believing that, at present, 7% of the total population is Muslim (whilst there are a maximum of 0.1% Muslims in the country) and, that by 2020, 13% of the Polish population will be Muslims (Ipsos MORI, 2016).

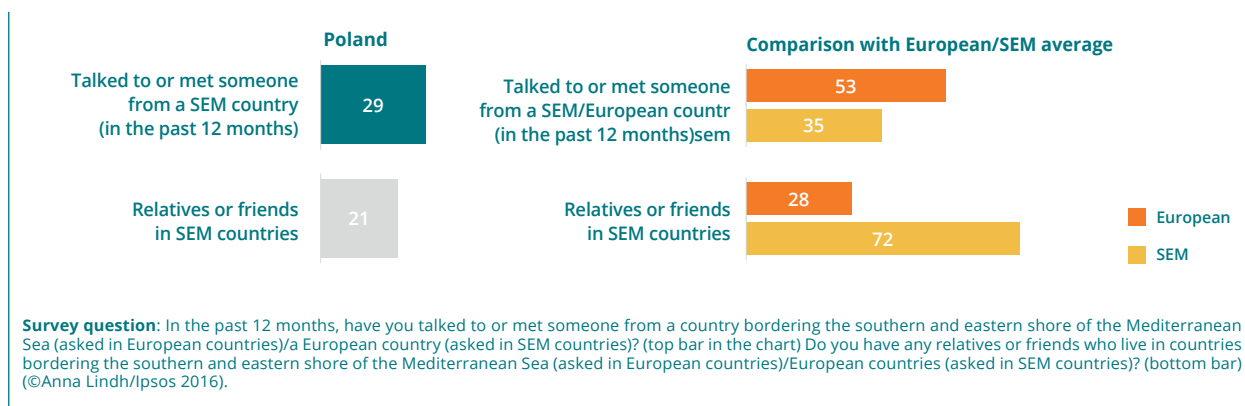
At the same time, the Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey shows that there is very limited interest amongst the Poles in news and information about the political and economic situation in the SEM region. Only every 4th or 5th interviewee respectively was very interested in news and information about the SEM region. Even less Polish citizens were very interested in cultural life, religious beliefs and practices and sport in the region. Here, one needs to point out that this disinterest is mutual and that on the other side of the Mediterranean the interest

of interviewees in European countries (except in their sport – most likely football) did not cross 30% either. Interestingly, the Survey also shows that the majority of Polish interviewees claim that the media have no impact on their views about people from the SEM. In the case of those whose views changed after exposure to media information about the region, 15% said it changed in a negative way and only 7% in a positive way. A quarter of the people interviewed, however, have not seen, read or heard anything in the Polish media about the SEM region. One may also see in the Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey an increasing importance of online media as a key source of cross-cultural reporting. In Poland, where 80% of households had access to the internet by the end of 2016 (GUS, 2017a), 40% of people treated online media as the most trusted source of information about the SEM region. This is significantly higher than in other European countries where, on average, 28% of the interviewees said online media was a source of information and in the SEM where 32% of the interviewees treated in such a way (Chart 20.3). TV still remains the main source of information for Poles about the SEM, however, its role has been diminishing – especially vis-à-vis growing importance of online and social media.

### Limited cross-cultural encounters

As mentioned earlier, Poland – for the first time in over a millennium long state history – emerged from the Second World War with very small ethnic and religious minorities. Some anthropologist call this new reality in which almost 95% of the population are ethnic Poles and 88% are Roman Catholics (GUS, 2015) ‘superhomogeneous’ (Buchowski, 2016) to emphasise the uniqueness of this new social arrangement in which

**Chart 20.4** Interactions with people from different countries in Poland



Catholicism is additionally very strongly intertwined with nationalism. The Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey confirms the limitations of having cross-cultural encounters in such a society. While the majority of Europeans (53%) surveyed had talked to or met someone from SEM in the last 12 months, only 29% of Poles had any contact with SEM people over the last year. (Chart 20.4) If they did have any contact with people from the region it was mostly through tourism, meeting in the public sphere or in the business or work context. This is in line with other research carried out in Poland that showed that one Pole in every ten personally knows a Muslim (CBOS, 2015) and that the negative attitudes towards followers of Islam develop in the absence of any contact with Muslims or the Muslim world. Although the results of the cross-cultural encounters are mixed, the Survey confirms that the more intensive the contact, the more people point out that it has mainly a neutral or positive outcome. For almost three quarters of Poles the main barrier to cross-cultural encounters with people from the SEM is a linguistic one.

In comparison to 2012 a decreasing number of Poles believe that cultural and religious diversity is important for the prosperity of the society. Whilst in 2012 36% either strongly or 45% somewhat agreed that diversity was important, in 2016 only 18% strongly and 38% mildly agreed with this statement. In a relatively homogenous society, cultural diversity is somehow feared and hence one may find lower levels of tolerance towards it than in other parts of Europe. For example, if for 65% of European interviewees marriage of a close relative with someone from a different cultural background would not be problematic at all, in Poland the same answer gave only 38%. Poles did not also see substantial benefits from the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. If other European nations surveyed saw important gains from such cooperation either in educational, environmental, cultural or business domains, in Poland only every third person saw it as a clear gain. Whilst this reluctance to engage more dynamically in Euro-Mediterranean

cooperation can be partially explained by geography and geopolitical position, some of it also stems from the nationalistic/patriotic movement taking place over the last years in the Polish society and the political decisions to scale down some of the European and Euro-Mediterranean partnerships.

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