

POLAND'S DEMOGRAPHIC FUTURE

Should Poland be fearful
for its demographic security?



Piotr Szukalski

University of Łódź
Committee on Demographic Sciences
of the Polish Academy of Sciences
Forecast Committee
of the Polish Academy of Sciences

There are two most common ways of understanding the term “demographic security.” In the static approach, a demographically secure country is one that has a population structure (bro-

ken down by age, gender, ethnic diversity, and education) that is conducive to its national security – in the military, economic, social, and political sense. In the dynamic approach, on the other hand, demographic security means maintaining a level of replacement of the population that causes relatively insignificant changes in population numbers and structure in the short and medium term, which in effect strengthens the political and economic stability of a country. Other viewpoints on demographic security may also occasionally be encountered, focusing mainly on the implications of the demographic transition for a country’s international standing.

Depopulation

The first and most significant threat faced by Poland is the depopulation of the vast majority of the country’s territory and the associated deformation of the age profile of the population living there. Nearly three-quarters of Poland’s municipalities have experienced population declines in recent years, and given the widespread unregistered movements we should recognize the true extent of the strong decline is most likely much greater than the official statistical data shows. Depopulation can be seen primarily in peripheral rural areas, where it leads to economic dysfunction (a lack of consumers and skilled workers) – perpetuating an unfavorable economic structure, reducing the municipalities’ revenue, and thus preventing the full implementation of local government tasks. Such a situation becomes particularly dangerous in border areas, where a smaller population means fewer “eyes and ears” to aid in monitoring these areas. At the same time, depopulated areas have a high proportion of elderly and very elderly people, who have specific health, social, communication needs that increasingly cash-strapped local and regional governments are unable to meet.

Moreover, the trend of depopulation is expected to continue. So far, it has had a local and regional character in Poland, but in the future it will most likely affect virtually the entire country. Its primary long-term driving force is the fact that the fertility rate is too low to ensure the simple replacement of generations (which requires that a typical woman should give birth to two children). For more than a quarter of a century, the fertility rate in Poland has been at less than 1.5 children – a fact that simply has to, with the appropriate delay, translate into a permanent decline in the country’s population and a further shift in the age structure (accelerated aging of the population).

Migrations

The opposite of depopulation is the concentration of population in metropolitan areas – in large cities and their sprawling suburbs. The emerging risks here are



**Piotr Szukalski,
PhD, DSc**

is an Associate Professor at the University of Łódź. In 2007–2010, a member of the Polish Ombudsman’s committee of experts for the affairs of the elderly. In 2008–2010, Polish senior-citizen organizations’ representative to the European Older People’s Platform. Since 2008, an elected member of the PAS Forecast Committee and the PAS Committee on Demographic Sciences. From 2016 to 2020 and from 2021, a member of the National Development Council (an advisory body to the President of the Republic of Poland). From 2016, a member of the Council for Senior Citizenship Policy to the Minister of Family, Labor and Social Policy (currently vice-chairman of this body), and from 2017 a member of the Government Population Council to the Prime Minister of the Republic of Poland (currently vice-chairman).

piotr.szukalski@uni.lodz.pl



ELŻBIETA SEKOWSKA/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

related to three factors. First, the unequal distribution of young representatives of the two sexes between metropolitan areas and those experiencing depopulation, due to the fact that women more frequently flee less attractive areas. In metropolitan areas, for every 100 men aged 25–34, there are typically 110–120 of their female age-peers, while in peripheral rural areas there are only 80–90, making it hard to find a female partner and so leading to lower rural fertility rates. Second, the urban concentration of the population especially applies to young, enterprising, well-educated people, which further reinforces the spatial differentiation of the level of development of different parts of the country and further augments the flight of young people from the least developed areas. Thirdly, the vast and densely populated metropolitan areas are characterized by strong human impacts on the environment (anthropopression), leading to its complete transformation and resulting in the disappearance of natural ecosystems on the micro and meso scales in such areas.

Another threat is the relatively high mortality rate of the Polish population, as compared to other EU countries. Relative to Scandinavian countries, for example, a typical Polish man lives on average 4–6 years shorter, and a Polish woman 2–3 years shorter. The higher mortality rate is particularly evident for mid-

dle-aged people, i.e. those aged 40–60, reflecting lifestyle choices, eating habits, environmental pollution, low health-promoting activity, and low levels of health care. As a result, thousands of people of working age, whose labor could still be contributing to bolstering the prosperity of Polish society for many years to come, are dying every year. To make matters worse, although Poland could be seen as gradually catching up to Western countries for a quarter of a century after 1992, unfavorable trends related to decelerating growth in life expectancy began to be noticeable after 2015. However, similar trends have also been observed in other countries that are wealthier than us.

Foreigners

One newly emerging threat directly stems from the fact that in recent years Poland has turned from a country of emigration into a country of immigration. Initially, this influx was of a short-term nature (or at least that was what the authorities intended) – allowing temporary economic immigrants from six countries of the former USSR to take up jobs in certain sectors of the economy facing shortages of Polish workers. Over time, it turned out that the influx was increasing, while at the same time taking on more of a long-term character, which is best seen in the grow-



ing numbers of binational marriages, foreign children studying in Polish schools, and apartments purchased by foreigners. In addition, this influx has turned out to be very homogeneous economically, linguistically, and culturally. However, Ukrainians are clearly predominant, followed by Belarusians to a much lesser extent. This trend was further reinforced by the influx of war refugees in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In many localities – generally the larger ones with more attractive job markets and a pre-existing Ukrainian diaspora – Ukrainians now account for 15–20 percent of the population. Workers from countries quite distant from Poland – in Central and East Asia – are also appearing in increasing numbers. Today we are unable to clearly forecast how this increased influx will affect social cohesion or trigger potential problems arising out of ethnic differences as well as the different age distributions of the native and immigrant populations, but it is nevertheless fair to mention this possibility.

Future directions

According to projections, Poland has entered a long-term period of declining population. But because the country has turned into a destination for immigrants, the changes are likely to be less dynamic in nature, and

if liberal immigration policies are implemented it is probably possible for Poland to achieve a sustained population growth following the example of Spain, for example.

Irrespective of which approach the Polish authorities adopt with respect to the influx of foreigners, we should nevertheless keep in mind the progressive and inevitable process of the aging (increasing numbers and share of people aged 60+) and “double aging” of the population (increasing numbers and share of people aged 80+) as important factors affecting long-term financial stability, through the need to provide funds both for pension payouts, the functioning of the healthcare system and the provision of elderly care services. One factor that can help counteract such demographic risks is proper labor market management, by creating incentives for people to remain economically active for as long as possible.

Demographic shifts will also adversely affect Poland’s military security. The Minister of Defense’s declarations about the Polish Armed Forces being upsized to 250,000 professional soldiers plus 50,000 territorial defense troops are, from this perspective, quite unrealistic. Between 2000 and 2022, an average of 391,000

One factor that can help counteract demographic risks is proper labor market management.

children were born each year, including 201,500 boys. If we assume that only men serve and that military service lasts 25 years, this would mean that 5 percent of all men will be professional soldiers. It is doubtful that it would be possible for Poland to encourage one out of every 20 men (and, if we realistically take into account health status, an even larger share of fully able-bodied men) to serve professionally in the military, or to finance such a large expense. Especially in a future in which the birth rate is expected to continue to decline, due to the decreasing number of women of typical childbearing age (25–35).

All of the above indicates that Poland’s future will be marked by a decreasing degree of demographic security in the traditional sense. A pro-natal measures, policies to boost the value of human capital (people’s skills, knowledge, qualifications, health, motivation) and immigration policy are all instruments that can help increase the level of demographic security, although each of these public policies has side effects as well. ■

Further reading:

Cincotta R.P., *Demographic Security Comes of Age*, ECSP Report, 2004, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/ecspr10_C-cincotta.pdf

Zhyvko Z., Stadnyk M., Boyko O., *Demographic Security: Key Threats and Means of Their Regulating*, *Economics, Finance and Management Review*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.36690/2674-5208-2021-4-11>