



Poles Apart?

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How significant is Poland on the international stage, really? On the one hand, if we are to assess the country's global importance objectively, perhaps a Pole like myself will not be the best judge. Yet on the other hand, it does seem that the role our country plays vis-à-vis humanity at large may interest us more than the rest of the world, possibly hinting at a certain sort of underlying inferiority complex. After all, it's unlikely that people in Turkey, Mexico, or the Netherlands spend much time pondering what Poles think of them.

What do Polish people themselves think of Poland? Views range from prideful superlatives, some holding Poland up as *Najjaśniejsza Rzeczpospolita* "the most serene republic" (a name harking back to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and even further), all the way to harsh criticism of our nation and fellow countrymen, especially for being unable to cooperate. The dichotomy has been evident for centuries, and is even reflected in our humor. Jokes speak of a Polish hell where no guards are needed to keep sinners in the boiling cauldron, because anyone trying to escape is quickly pulled back in by their fellow countrymen – unlike other countries' hells, which supposedly require vigilant demons.

We might turn to international statistics for some kind of objective gauge. In terms of population, Poland is in 37th place globally. It ranks higher than that in industrial production – albeit still significantly behind South Korea, for instance, which has four times more production with just 35% more residents. Poland's historical challenges – partitions, wars, and communism – might explain some difficulties, but Korea has also faced its own severe hardships, such as the brutal Japanese occupation and the Korean War. Meanwhile, Indonesia, with a population seven times larger than Poland's, has only double our industrial output. Therefore, we might conclude, Poland is neither at the bottom of the barrel nor in the lead in terms of productivity.

The same pattern extends to other areas that bring countries international acclaim. Our land has produced quite a few innovative individuals who expanded global horizons, but intriguingly, they often achieved this after emigrating from Poland, thus their success is partly attributed to other countries. For example, the work of renowned anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski and biochemist Kazimierz Funk are often credited to the Anglo-American world (which did, admittedly, provide them with the conducive environment and research infrastructure they needed for their talents to flourish).

Regarding the contributions of Polish scholars to science and technology, we should concede that Poland, despite the advances it has made, still often adopts rather than innovates. One exception is Tade-



Maria Anna Ciemerych-Litwinienko, "Pałac" (Palace), 2023, analog collage, 210×279 mm

usz Krwawicz, whose cataract surgery technique developed in 1960 came into global use. Others include Stefan Banach, Jan Łukasiewicz, and Alfred Tarski, who were among the world's leading logicians and mathematicians prior to WWII.

Polish artists, musicians, writers, filmmakers, and theater figures have also earned Poland international respect – but they have not necessarily been particularly numerous compared to quite a few other countries. Notably, Fryderyk Chopin is revered, especially by the Japanese who often visit his birthplace, Żelazowa Wola. Pope John Paul II (Karol Wojtyła) also significantly influenced global perceptions of Poland, shaping world events and playing a key role in precipitating the decline of communism.

Poland's struggles for independence at various times certainly have inspired global admiration, such as during the November Uprising of 1830–31 and during the Solidarity movement in the 1980s. However, again we have to admit that the Irish, Hungarians, many other nations have similarly had to fight for their freedom. Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Ukraine likewise have traditions of “accursed soldiers” who continued fighting even when communist regimes had become well-entrenched after WWII.

A country's clout on the world stage is certainly related to its population, but not strictly proportionally. Smaller nations like Finland, Denmark, and Switzerland command great respect and punch above their weight. It is uncertain, therefore, if Poland's declining population will one day significantly impair our international standing. However, while decreasing birth rates often accompany rising wealth, the extent seen in Poland is certainly notable and concerning.

The way a country is perceived is also significantly affected by tourism, which is a major income source for many nations. Poland excels in this sector, continually improving and attracting millions of visitors annually. Tourists from Europe and beyond, including as far afield as Chile, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, and Ghana, are drawn not only by rich historical sites but also by a robust hospitality infrastructure.

What about our potential inferiority complex? The prominent Polish psychiatrist Antoni Kępiński once theorized that Polish society primarily consists of people with “hysteric” and “psychasthenic” personality types, who are highly concerned with others' perceptions. Since his death in 1972, almost everything in Poland has changed: the political system, the degree of freedom, the technological environment, and the diminishing myth of the West as a paradise. Back then, owning a telephone or traveling abroad were rarities; today, our lives are shaped by computers, smartphones, and international contacts. Nevertheless, the incidence of depression has increased – like in other developed countries. I wonder, therefore,



whether Poles might still be overly concerned with how foreigners perceive us.

In any case, neither individuals nor nations should exist solely for others. Mature adults do not continuously seek validation from their surroundings, but can view themselves objectively and critically. One does not love one's country because it is held in high esteem abroad, or because it surpasses some other nation in some ranking. Such love should be unconditional. Much like in the case of migratory fish that go to great lengths to return to their birth rivers to spawn, it is a deep-rooted sense of attachment to their homeland that often brings Polish emigres back in their later years – sometimes even against practical considerations. ■

Maria Anna Ciemerych-Litwinienko, "Wieża" (Tower), 2021, analog collage on gouache, 200×200 mm