

Poles More Tolerant

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Czechs, Slovaks and Westerners are the most liked foreigners in Poland. Poles are the most negative towards Arabs and Roma, researchers have found. In general, there is much more positive attitude towards foreigners in Poland now than 20 years ago. However, racism is still present in some circles, especially among soccer fans.



Every year the Polish Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS) publishes a report on Poles' attitudes towards foreigners. According to its 2012 study, it appears that Poles divide strangers into four groups.

The first category is composed of people from Western countries, Poland's southern neighbors from the Visegrad group and Japan. This year, for the first time, Czechs and Slovaks are the most liked nationalities in Poland, with 58 percent and 57 percent of Poles respectively expressing a positive attitude towards them. They are closely followed by Italians, Britons, Spaniards and

Frenchmen.

The second category includes countries from southeastern Europe and Germany. About half of Poles have a positive attitude to them and positive attitudes are twice as frequent as negative ones.

Poland's eastern neighbors, with whom relations have been troubled in recent history, (Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians), as well as Jews, Chinese and Vietnamese, belong to the third category. Poles are as likely to feel negative as positive towards them.

Arabs and Roma comprise the last category. Only 23 percent and 24 percent of Poles have a positive attitude towards them and twice that number of Poles perceive them in a negative way.

Poles no longer idealize the West, while their perception of their neighbors has improved considerably compared to 20 years ago.

Positive attitudes to Western nations have decreased over the last two decades. Meanwhile, perceptions of Jews, Germans and Russians have improved dramatically, even though these are still less positive than in Western countries.

"You can't generalize but some Poles idealized the West until the early 1990s," says Marcin Kornak, head of the anti-fascist association Nigdy więcej (Never More) and editor-in-chief of the magazine of the same name.

"Western Europe and the U.S. were considered a better world... When Poles started traveling around the world after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 and after Poland entered the EU in 2004, they became aware that not all Americans were that great and that not all French were that romantic."

The Polish Institute of Public Affairs (ISP) also studies Poles' attitudes to foreigners, comparing these with the situation in other EU states. It appears that Poles are neither particularly racist nor very tolerant.

An ISP study shows that only one Pole in ten thought that foreigners should be allowed to work in Poland in 1992,

while one in two thought so in 2008. This rate climbs to 70 percent among people who knows at least one foreigner.

“The ‘theory of contact’ explains that when you are in contact with someone, you are more inclined to accept him and you have less stereotypes about him,” says Agata Teutsch from the Autonomia Foundation, a nongovernmental Polish group that fights discrimination and violence based on gender and sexual orientation.

The ISP report underlines that only 2 percent of the Polish population were born abroad (the lowest rate in the EU), that 75 percent do not know any foreigner living in Poland and that 96 percent have never employed a foreigner.

Row over BBC documentary

BBC journalist Chris Rogers sparked controversy with a documentary entitled “Stadiums of Hate,” screened shortly before the recent European soccer championships hosted by Poland and Ukraine. Rogers argues that many Polish fans are racist and intolerant. Many politicians, fans and others in Poland were outraged by such accusations.

“Chris Rogers went maybe too far in his conclusions,” said Kornak. “But racism in stadiums is an incontrovertible fact. The scenes of racist violence that he filmed really occurred.”

Teutsch says that “fascism really exists in our country and many soccer fans are involved in neo-fascist movements, which are even more powerful than 20 years ago.”

Teutsch believes there is generally a lack of tolerance towards “difference” in Poland, not just in terms of race and ethnicity but also terms of religion and sexual orientation.

“It’s an educational problem. Polish schools don’t teach tolerance for other people. They don’t teach that being different isn’t necessarily bad and that diversity is something valuable,” she adds.