

Poland

Population: 37.8m

Country media capture risk overall (value - %): 41.8

Media capture risk average across countries (mean - %): 38.3



Country Overview

Poland shows medium levels of risk of media capture across all dimensions, even though lower scores emerge when considering, specifically, the media and the political ones. In recent years, the country has experienced pronounced political and institutional tensions, particularly during the 2015-2023 period under the *Law and Justice (PiS)* government, marked by conflicts over the rule of law and media governance. Following the 2023 elections, a new coalition government led by Donald Tusk has pursued institutional reforms in a context of persistent ideological divisions and societal polarization.

Poland's media system combines a relatively diverse private sector with a highly politicized public media environment and strong links between media ownership and political power. Independent private outlets such as *TVN*, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, and *Onet.pl* contribute to pluralism, while public service media, especially the *TVP* group, were subject under the former *PiS* government (2015-2023) to extensive political influence and instrumentalization in support of government narratives. State influence over the media landscape expanded further through the acquisition of the regional newspaper network *PolskaPress* by the majority state-owned company *Orlen*, raising concerns about editorial independence at the local level. Poland media landscape is marked also by the strong presence of the Catholic press.

The Polish media market is relatively concentrated, marked by significant cross-media ownership and clear editorial polarization between conservative and liberal outlets. These structural features are often cited as key factors shaping both market plurality and political independence – two composite indicators that currently register a medium level of risk. Following the change of government in 2023, efforts to rebalance public media governance have reduced overt partisanship but have been hindered by institutional conflict: in 2024, the National Broadcasting Council contested leadership changes at *TVP* and delayed the disbursement of public funds, leaving public service media governance unstable. Ownership concerns intensified ahead of the 2025 presidential election, as the government designated *TVN* and *Polsat* as “strategic enterprises”, granting veto powers over ownership changes to prevent perceived hostile or foreign takeovers. At the same time, audience fragmentation and digital disruption have enabled the rise of new and politically aligned actors – such as *TV Republika* and creator-led platforms like *Kanał Zero* – while the press sector continues to face economic decline and job losses.

Poland's media capture risk level is furthermore linked to its political system, which is characterized by persistent ideological divisions, rooted in the post-communist transition and intensified during the 2015-2023 rule of the *Law and Justice party (PiS)*. These divisions largely oppose liberal, pro-European forces to political actors claiming to defend national sovereignty and “traditional” Polish Catholic values, reflecting the enduring influence of religion and cultural conservatism in public life. Following the October 2023 elections, a coalition led by Donald Tusk took office with the stated aim of restoring the rule of law and strengthening the independence of state institutions, including the judiciary and public media. In 2024, the government launched reforms to curb political interference in courts and prosecutors’ offices and to hold former officials accountable for corruption, contributing to improvements in civil liberties and parliamentary effectiveness. However, these efforts have been constrained by institutional deadlock, notably due to President Andrzej Duda's veto power and the continued influence of *PiS*-aligned bodies such as the Constitutional Tribunal and the National Council of the Judiciary. Despite free and competitive elections and an active civil society, political independence remains exposed to many risks, particularly regarding public service media governance, transparency of political advertising, and weak self-regulatory safeguards. On the other hand, though, Poland performs significantly well in power distribution, mainly thanks to recent reform efforts that have sought to enhance democratic standards by increasing accountability for corruption and protecting the autonomy of judges, prosecutors, and state media.

Poland's political features are very well reflected on its society, that is shaped by enduring ideological divisions and contested understandings of rights and social values. Public debate remains polarized between liberal, pro-European positions and actors invoking national sovereignty and “traditional” Polish Catholic values, a cleavage that continues to influence social and cultural dynamics. While recent political changes have been accompanied by efforts to strengthen civil liberties, significant challenges persist, particularly for minorities and migrants. Generally, social inclusion remains uneven. Legislative initiatives have sought to expand legal protections against hate speech and hate crimes, notably by extending safeguards to additional vulnerable groups, yet these measures have been politically contested, and their practical implementation remains uncertain. Moreover, human rights organizations have raised sustained concerns regarding migration management at the Belarusian border, where pushback practices and legal measures limiting the accountability of security forces have resulted in serious humanitarian consequences, including loss of life.

Gender equality is formally recognized, but reproductive rights continue to represent a major source of social tension. Since the Constitutional Tribunal's 2020 ruling that drastically restricted access to abortion, several high-profile medical cases and related court proceedings have reignited public debate and protest, exposing persistent barriers to reproductive healthcare and legal clarity for medical professionals. More broadly, limitations in access to public information, weaknesses in whistleblower protection, and the legacy of restrictive legislation continue to affect public trust and the effective enjoyment of social and civic rights, even though some specific indicators show improvements in the societal context (which remains for Poland the best-performing dimension). For example, Poland's education score shows lower levels of risk, thank to features such as one of lowest shares of people with a low level of education (less than 10%).

In conclusion, Poland presents a democratic context shaped by enduring political polarization and contested institutional reforms that affect the media system, governance, and social cohesion. While electoral competition, media pluralism, and civic participation persist, political influence over public institutions and media governance remains a central challenge. Recent reform efforts following the 2023 elections signal an attempt to restore institutional independence, but their impact is constrained by ongoing institutional conflicts. At the same time, unresolved social tensions, particularly around migration, minority rights, and reproductive freedoms, continue to test the resilience of democratic norms.