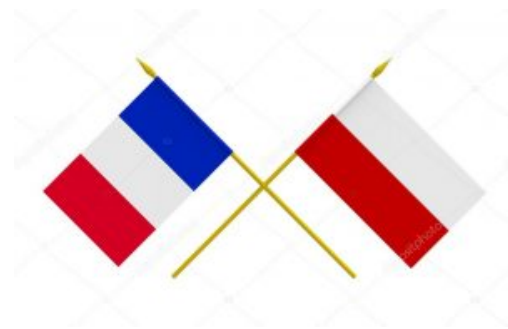


Poland beyond the clichés: a European neighbor forgotten by the French

Description

Poland remains a cultural blind spot for many French people. Between persistent clichés and historical ignorance, this European neighbor nonetheless conceals a vibrant artistic, intellectual, and political scene.

Within the European Union, people are supposed to share common values, a particular political vision, and a desire for closer cooperation. However, when French citizens are asked about Poland, their knowledge is often limited: a few clichés about the cold, Catholicism, or even vague ideas about the “Eastern bloc,” Lech Wałęsa, or “Polish plumbers”⁽¹⁾. This cultural deficit is all the more astonishing given that Poland, the EU’s sixth most populous country, is an increasingly key player in contemporary Europe. How can this gap be explained? What are its origins? And why is it essential to remedy it?



A deep-rooted ignorance of history

France and Poland share a long and rich history. As early as the 19th century, following the successive partitions that wiped Poland off the map⁽²⁾, many of Poland’s elite (mainly intellectuals, artists, and soldiers) found refuge in Paris. Frédéric Chopin, Adam Mickiewicz, and Marie Curie all made significant contributions to France’s cultural and scientific heritage. On the political front, Napoleon Bonaparte raised high hopes by creating the Duchy of Warsaw (1807-1815), a powerful symbol of French determination to support Polish sovereignty.

These links continued into the 20th century. After the First World War, Polish immigration to France intensified⁽³⁾ between 1919 and 1939, with almost 500,000 Poles settling mainly in the mining regions of Nord and Pas-de-Calais, attracted by the growing demand for labor in mining and industry. This community became one of the largest immigrant communities in France at the time. The Polish army also made a significant contribution to the French campaign in 1940.

Yet this common heritage has not aroused any deep-seated curiosity, at least on the French side. While the Poles, out of strategic, economic, or cultural interest, have always closely followed French developments, the French have often confined Poland to a blurred periphery of “Eastern Europe.” This perception is reinforced by a school curriculum that rarely addresses the history and culture of Central and Eastern Europe, except through the limited prism of the two world wars. Key periods such as resistance to the Soviet yoke, post-1989 reforms, or Poland’s contemporary role within the European Union remain largely absent from textbooks, contributing to a lasting deficit in mutual understanding.

A stereotyped and simplistic representation

The French view of Poland is often characterized by clichés that oversimplify reality and obscure its diversity.

Poland is often associated with intense religiosity, characterized by conservative Catholicism and traditional values. This perception has been reinforced by the period of PiS government (2005-2007, then 2015-2023), which put forward a political and cultural discourse centered on these themes. It is also regularly portrayed through a rural and agricultural reality, as if villages outweighed modern and dynamic cities.

The harsh climate, with its long, cold winters, contributes to the country’s image as a “tough” one. In France, Poles are often associated with the history of working-class immigration (mining, construction, industry), while the figure of the

“Polish plumber” has emerged as a more recent cliché.

Polish cuisine is often stereotypically reduced to heavy, unrefined dishes rich in meat, potatoes, and cabbage, with little regard for its gastronomic diversity.

Some clichés describe Poles as a proud, tough, sometimes boorish people, but also warm and hospitable in the family sphere.

Politically, Poland is frequently perceived as conservative, particularly on social issues, women’s rights, and minority rights, a perception also accentuated by the period of PiS.

The country’s history, marked by partitions, wars, and communism, is often reduced to a painful past, giving the impression of a country frozen in nostalgia. In France, there is also a controversial perception of Poland’s role in the Holocaust, which tends to obscure the complexity of historical and memorial debates within Polish society itself.

Moreover, Poland is still perceived as a country “in the East,” culturally distant from Western Europe, which accentuates a certain distance. Finally, the Polish language is often perceived as difficult to understand or pronounce, reinforcing the idea of a closed or complex culture.

These sometimes biased representations limit our understanding of contemporary Poland. They reflect not so much a Polish reality as a Western viewpoint which, by implicitly ranking European cultures in a hierarchy, hinders the construction of a more balanced intercultural dialogue.

A media and linguistic divide

Another major obstacle to the French understanding of Poland is media coverage. The mainstream French media devote few reports or [in-depth analyses](#) to Poland, except during crises or controversies, such as European judgments on the rule of law, [demonstrations against abortion](#), and [tensions with Brussels](#), particularly during the PiS period. This framing gives a partial and often negative image of the country. However, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Poland has emerged as a central player in Europe, notably through the scale of its military and humanitarian support. This new visibility helps to nuance its perception in France: the country is seen as less exclusively aligned with the United States and more as an essential regional pillar. Nonetheless, this media coverage, often punctual and focused on moments of crisis, remains insufficient to grasp the complexity of Polish social, cultural, and political dynamics.

Added to this is the language barrier: Polish, a Slavic language with a complex grammatical system, is rarely taught in France. Translations of contemporary Polish literature are rare, although authors such as Olga Tokarczuk (Nobel Prize in Literature 2018) are helping to change this. As a result, the French have very little access to Polish content in the original or even in translation, which reinforces the distance between the two countries.

An abundant culture

Poland is a rich artistic and intellectual breeding ground: its architectural heritage (from Kraków to Gdańsk), its cinema (from Wajda to Pawlikowski, via Kieślowski or Holland), its literature (Szymborska, Mickiewicz, Lem, Miłosz, Gombrowicz), as well as its theater (Grotowski, Kantor) and contemporary music scene all enjoy international recognition.

However, this presence remains fragmentary in France and relies heavily on cultural mediation, particularly literary translation, which is still too limited.

An ignored Polish diaspora

Yet France is home to one of the largest Polish diasporas in Western Europe. Since the great migrations of the early 20th century, several million people of Polish origin have contributed to France’s industrial, social, and cultural development, particularly in the Nord and Lorraine coalfields. Yet, this presence has remained largely invisible, reduced to folklore (festivals, traditional costumes), with little to no recognition of its contribution to national history.

Unlike other diasporas that are more visible in the public arena, the “French people of Polish origin” are rarely identified as such, even when their individual trajectories have left a lasting mark on the country’s cultural, political, or economic life. This relative obscurity partly explains Poland’s low profile in the French collective imagination: the country is perceived as an outsider, despite its history and population being deeply rooted in France.

Building bridges

Several avenues could be explored to strengthen Poland’s presence in the French cultural arena. The first step would be to give greater prominence to the history and culture of Central Europe in school curricula, thereby raising awareness of a region that is often underappreciated. Support for the translation and dissemination of Polish literature, both classical and contemporary, would also be a significant lever for closer ties.

In addition, the development of artistic and audio-visual co-productions, notably within the framework of partnerships with channels such as *Arte*, would give greater visibility to Polish creations. Such agreements already exist with Polish public television (TVP), even if they have sometimes been suspended for political reasons, highlighting the sensitivity of cultural cooperation to national contexts.

Last but not least, organizing cross-cultural events would make it possible to showcase the diversity and vitality of both cultural scenes. While the previous primary France-Poland cultural season (*Nova Polska*) took place in 2004, other recent initiatives, such as the KINOPOLSKA 2025 festival, testify to a desire to pursue these exchanges. However, these initiatives remain ad hoc and insufficient to bridge the cultural gap and increase awareness of Poland in France.

France’s cultural deficit about Poland is not simply an oversight; it reveals the asymmetrical relationship between cultures within Europe itself. In a world where identity-based divisions threaten the cohesion of the European project, it is imperative to rebalance the representation of countries that are still sometimes perceived as “peripheral,” even though they are the “heart” of Europe. Rediscovering Poland, in all its richness and complexity, also means broadening our understanding of the world. It’s a step towards a Europe that is truly plural, supportive, and aware of its internal diversity.

Notes:

(1) The “Polish plumber” is an expression popularized in France in the spring of 2005 during the debate on the draft European Constitutional Treaty.

(2) The partitions of Poland refer to the process by which the Kingdom of Poland (officially *the Republic of Two Nations*, a union of Poland and Lithuania) was dismantled in the late 18th century by its three powerful neighbors, Prussia, Austria, and Russia. There were three primary partitions (1772, 1793, and 1795).

(3) In the 1890s, Polish workers began to immigrate to France. By the end of the 19th century, approximately 10,000 Poles were employed in mines and industry, primarily in the north and east of the country.

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[Link to the French version of the article](#)

* Sandy Paskiewicz defended her doctoral thesis in 2021 on *Teaching French in Poland and Polish in France between 1989 and 2017* (under the supervision of Stanisław Fiszer, Université de Lorraine).

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