



FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2025

Poland

82

FREE

/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	34/40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	48/60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

80/100 Free

A country or territory's Freedom in the World status depends on its aggregate Political Rights score, on a scale of 0–40, and its aggregate Civil Liberties score, on a scale of 0–60. See the methodology.



Overview

Poland's democratic institutions took root at the start of its transition from communist rule in 1989. Rapid economic growth and other societal changes have benefited some segments of the population more than others, contributing to a deep divide between liberal, pro-European parties and those purporting to defend national interests and "traditional" Polish Catholic values. The populist, socially conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party exerted significant political influence over state institutions and damaged Poland's democratic progress after taking power in 2015, but it was defeated by an opposition coalition in the 2023 elections. The new government set out to fulfill its electoral promises by holding its predecessors to account and attempting to repair and strengthen the independence of state institutions.

Key Developments in 2024

- In February, the government presented an action plan to restore the rule of law in Poland, and its reform efforts ended a long dispute between the European Commission and the former PiS government. Among other moves, Justice Minister Adam Bodnar curbed the powers of disciplinary officers who had sought to punish judges for ruling against the PiS government. However, President Andrzej Duda, a PiS ally, effectively blocked legislation aimed at reforming the National Council of the Judiciary (KRS) and the Constitutional Tribunal (TK), both of which had been politicized under PiS.
- Also during the year, prosecutors initiated multiple investigations into allegations of corruption among former government and PiS officials, leading to criminal charges in several cases related to misuse of public funds.
- After a May incident in which a Polish soldier was fatally stabbed while guarding against illegal border crossings from Belarus, Parliament in July approved a law limiting the criminal liability of security personnel who violate rules governing the use of firearms while defending the border. The president signed the legislation in August. In December, the government advanced a bill that would allow it to temporarily suspend the right to seek asylum.
- The ruling coalition took a number of steps to restrict the practice of bypassing public consultation on draft laws, which had become common under the PiS government. In July, the lower house of Parliament amended

its rules of procedure to require public consultation on bills introduced by lawmakers or citizens, among other changes.

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?

3/4

The president is directly elected for up to two five-year terms. The president's appointment of a prime minister must be confirmed by the Sejm, the lower house of Parliament. While the prime minister holds most executive power, the president also has some influence, particularly over defense and foreign policy matters. Incumbent president Andrzej Duda, who was supported by PiS, was reelected in July 2020 with 51 percent of the second-round vote. Turnout stood at 68.1 percent.

The 2020 presidential election was originally scheduled for May; that April, citing the COVID-19 pandemic, the government drafted plans to hold the vote with mail-in ballots and have the post office administer it instead of the constitutionally mandated National Electoral Commission (PKW). Facing criticism, the government backtracked on the plan and proceeded with the first round in June. Later in the year, an administrative court ruled that the prime minister had violated the law by engaging in this effort. In December 2023, the newly elected Sejm formed a committee to investigate the legality of the former PiS government's actions.

Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) observers concluded that the 2020 election was competitive and well organized but was tarnished by "hostility" and "biased coverage by the public broadcaster," which PiS had effectively transformed into a government mouthpiece. The observers also noted that Duda received an "undue advantage" from campaigning by high-ranking officials, including then-premier Mateusz Morawiecki. Observers raised

additional concerns over the persistent use of homophobic rhetoric by Duda, his team, and PiS's media allies.

Donald Tusk of the centrist Civic Coalition (KO) was appointed as prime minister in December 2023, following the October parliamentary elections. While an alliance including the KO, the Third Way (TD) bloc, and the New Left (NL) party had collectively outpolled PiS, Duda offered PiS the first chance to form a new government. Another Morawiecki-led government was installed in late November but lost a confidence vote in December, allowing Tusk's government to take office.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?

3/4

Members of the bicameral Parliament are elected for four-year terms. The 460-seat Sejm is elected by proportional representation and holds most legislative authority. The 100 members of the Senate, the upper house, are elected in single-member constituencies. The Senate can delay and amend legislation but has few other powers.

In the October 2023 parliamentary elections, PiS won 35.4 percent of the vote and 194 Sejm seats. The centrist KO, the center-right TD, and a bloc led by the NL won a combined 248 seats and a ruling majority. The electoral threshold was also passed by the far-right Confederation Liberty and Independence (Konfederacja) alliance, which won 18 Sejm seats. The KO-led coalition also gained control of the Senate, taking a combined 61 seats against PiS's 34. Turnout stood at 74.3 percent, the highest since 1989.

OSCE observers called the elections competitive and well-managed but noted that PiS benefited from favorable public media coverage and state resources. The PiS government initiated a referendum, held concurrently with the elections, on a series of questions concerning migration, pension policy, and the sale of public assets, allowing it to circumvent some campaign-finance regulations. Turnout for the referendum questions was too low for the results to be valid, however. The secrecy of the parliamentary vote was affected by the referendum, as those who chose not to participate in the latter had to openly decline the ballot at polling stations. Local outlets belonging to Polska Press, which is owned by state-

controlled energy company PKN Orlen, reportedly refused to publish paid electoral advertisements from some opposition parties. In addition, OSCE observers reported the use of “intolerant, xenophobic, and misogynistic” language during the campaign.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?

3/4

Poland’s electoral framework and its implementation have generally ensured free and fair elections, though 2017–18 legal changes increased the potential for political influence over the PKW, which manages elections, oversees party finances, and decides whether to withhold state subsidies. While courts had nominated all nine PKW members under the previous rules, seven members are now chosen by Parliament at the beginning of each term, giving the ruling majority control over the body. The commission also includes a member picked by the TK, which as of 2024 was still led by judges installed under the PiS government.

The Chamber of Extraordinary Control and Public Affairs (IKNSP), a Supreme Court chamber whose members were appointed by the politicized KRS, can validate or reject election and referendum results and hears appeals from decisions of the PKW on state subsidies for political parties. In December 2024, the chamber rejected an August PKW decision that accused PiS of misusing public resources, which had threatened the party’s access to state subsidies, but the PKW then questioned the validity of the ruling, citing earlier findings by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) and the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) that the IKNSP was not an independent court established by law. The dispute, which also involved the Finance Ministry, remained unresolved at year’s end.

Since 2011, despite demographic changes, Parliament has not modified the distribution of seats among electoral constituencies. This results in lower voting power in major cities, especially in the Warsaw constituency, where all votes cast by Polish people abroad are counted.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?

4/4

Poland's political parties generally organize and operate freely. PiS and Civic Platform (PO), the main party within the KO, long dominated the country's modern party system, but challengers have risen and fallen over the years. The center-right Poland 2050, founded in 2020, launched the TD alliance with the Polish People's Party to contest the 2023 polls, and the bloc became the third largest in Parliament. Parties must win 5 percent of the vote for representation in the Sejm, and coalitions must win 8 percent.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?

4/4

There have been multiple rotations of power among rival parties since the transition from communist rule. The victory of the KO, TD, and NL coalition in the 2023 parliamentary elections ended a lengthy period of PiS rule, though the challengers had to overcome obstacles including media bias and funding imbalances. PiS, the largest opposition party as of 2024, retained considerable support and received a plurality of votes in the April regional assembly elections.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?

4/4

Voters and politicians are generally free from undue interference by outside groups. However, a lack of effective control mechanisms has allowed parties to misuse state resources to finance their campaign activities. Observers of the 2023 elections noted that PiS exerted undue influence through its use of state funds and state-controlled companies. The PKW's unprecedented August 2024 decision to reject the financial report of the PiS election committee regarding the 2023 elections was based on allegations of unauthorized use of public money in the party's campaign. PiS in turn accused the PKW of ignoring irregularities in the financing of other parties' campaigns. While the IKNSP overturned the PKW decision on appeal in December, doubts about the Supreme Court chamber's legitimacy left the matter unresolved at year's end.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?

4/4

Women have equal political rights but are underrepresented in national political bodies. After the 2023 elections, women held about 30 percent of Sejm seats, 19 percent of Senate seats, and 10 of the cabinet's 27 seats.

Members of ethnic, religious, and other minority groups enjoy full political rights and electoral opportunities. However, LGBT+ people face significant challenges when attempting to enter politics and advocate for their political interests in practice. Under PiS, government figures and their media allies commonly espoused homophobic rhetoric.

Electoral lists representing recognized national minorities are not subject to the minimum vote threshold for parliamentary representation.

C. Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?

3/4

Freely elected officials generally determine and implement laws and policies without interference. Compared with practices under the PiS government, the ruling coalition of the KO, TD, and NL generally increased parliamentary scrutiny of legislation by slowing down the processing of laws in the Sejm and expanding opportunities for public consultation.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?

3/4

Lawmakers launched a number of legislative efforts aimed at strengthening anticorruption mechanisms during 2024. In June, the president signed the Whistleblower Protection Act, granting protection against retaliation to people who report irregularities related to corruption and other issues, though it featured important exemptions on topics including defense and labor law.

Also in 2024, prosecutors initiated multiple investigations into allegations of corruption among PiS officials, which had not been thoroughly investigated while the party was in power. Charges were filed against dozens of former officials, including for irregularities in the spending of public money from the Justice Fund, which was intended for victims of crime, and at the Government Strategic Reserves Agency. Separately, the Sejm continued to investigate alleged malfeasance through special committees, including one panel focusing on alleged corruption in the issuance of visas under PiS; in its final report in December, that committee recommended criminal charges against the former prime minister, the former foreign minister, and several other figures. In February, Poland had joined the European Public Prosecutor's Office, allowing the body to investigate possible misuses of EU funds in the country.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?

3/4

The right to public information is guaranteed by the constitution and by the 2001 Act on Access to Public Information, but obtaining records and data from public

institutions can be slow and difficult in practice.

During 2024, the ruling coalition of the KO, TD, and NL took steps to improve transparency in the legislative process and curb the use of accelerated procedures to bypass debate and consultation. Among other changes, a set of amendments to the Sejm's rules of procedure that took effect in October required public consultation periods for bills proposed by lawmakers or citizens. Similarly in August, the Council of Ministers amended its rules of procedure to make it more difficult to skip public consultation on government-proposed measures. While public hearings and consultations were carried out in a number of cases, the new rules still allowed exceptions, and some important bills, including the draft law on suspending the right to asylum, were not submitted for consultation.

Score Change: The score improved from 2 to 3 due to new rules and practices that increased opportunities for public consultation in the legislative process.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?	3/4
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The constitution guarantees freedom of expression and forbids censorship, but PiS exerted considerable influence over the country's media sector while in power. The new government moved in late 2023 to put TVP, Polish Radio, and the Polish Press Agency into liquidation, allowing the culture minister to appoint liquidators who took control of these public media outlets. The decisions had all been confirmed by court registrars as of April 2024. The government's tactic for changing the outlets' leadership bypassed the National Media Council, a body created by PiS and tasked with making appointments, and the National Broadcasting Council (KRRiT), which bore that responsibility before legal changes introduced by PiS in 2016. At the time, both regulators were still controlled by PiS

appointees. TVP provided more balanced political coverage under its new leaders, even though it was accused of favoring politicians from the ruling coalition. In June, the government shared initial proposals on a new media law meant to make public broadcasters more independent. It also pledged during the year to develop safeguards against the increasing use of SLAPPs (strategic lawsuits against public participation).

Public media encountered financial difficulties in 2024 after President Duda vetoed a key budget bill in December 2023 and the KRRiT suspended license fee payments in January. The KRRiT also continued to delay decisions on private broadcasters' license renewals and impose high penalties on some outlets; in March it ordered TVN to pay a 550,000 zloty (\$137,000) fine for airing a documentary about the late Pope John Paul II's knowledge of child abuse within the Roman Catholic Church in Poland.

Since late 2020, the state-owned energy firm PKN Orlen has owned Polska Press, which operates a large number of regional newspapers and online portals. In August 2024, the company's new president announced plans to restructure and sell the media group.

After a Polish soldier was fatally stabbed in May while guarding against illegal border crossings from Belarus, the government in June reintroduced a ban on entering the border zone near Belarus; a similar ban had been imposed in 2021 amid an increase in irregular border crossings by migrants. Under the new rules, journalists could enter the area only with special authorization from the Border Guard.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?	4/4
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The state respects freedom of religion, though PiS is aligned with the Roman Catholic Church, which wields significant influence in Poland. Religious groups are not required to register with the authorities but receive tax benefits if they do. Minority faiths are generally able to obtain registration in practice. While there is a formal ban on state funding for church construction, a church can obtain Culture Ministry funding if it includes a museum.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?

3/4

The right to pursue academic research is guaranteed by the constitution and has been upheld by courts, though political leaders have at times attempted to exert control over academic institutions, administrators, and scholarship. In September 2024, academics protested the replacement of the leader of IDEAS NCBR, a research and development center tasked with artificial intelligence research, accusing the government of making a political decision. In December, Science Minister Dariusz Wiczorek resigned following revelations of his improper ties with the rector of the University of Szczecin and reports that he had exposed a whistleblower who reported irregularities at the university.

In July, the government announced plans to liquidate the Copernicus Academy, which had been created under the PiS government in 2022 to finance scientific research. The Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN) had warned at the time that the new academy would duplicate much of its work and threaten its funding. Also in July, the government published a draft law to reform the PAN, prompting debate about whether the proposed structural changes would strengthen or weaken the institution's autonomy. The measures had yet to be finalized at year's end.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?

3/4

People are generally free to engage in private discussions without fear of harassment or detention by the authorities. However, Poland has harsh defamation laws, including prohibitions on offending religious feelings and insulting the president, and these have been used to launch criminal cases in recent years. In March 2024, the Supreme Court upheld a district court ruling that cleared activists of insulting religious feelings by depicting the Virgin Mary with a rainbow halo.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?

3/4

Freedom of assembly is generally respected in law and in practice. Public demonstrations are held with some regularity, though local authorities can limit demonstrations in their districts on grounds of maintaining public order. Police have been known to use excessive force against demonstrators in recent years.

Throughout 2024, students at Poland's largest universities held protests against the Israeli military's actions in the Gaza Strip. Most proceeded without major disruption, though at the rector's request, police removed protesters who had been blocking access roads to the University of Warsaw, leading to criminal charges against some protesters. Climate change activists from the group Last Generation also triggered police action and government criticism in certain instances for holding street-blocking protests in the capital.

LGBT+ pride parades have taken place in Poland in greater numbers in recent years, despite authorities' unsuccessful attempts to obstruct them.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work?

3/4

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have generally operated without government interference in Poland. However, a 2017 law centralized distribution of public NGO funding through a new body, the National Freedom Institute (NIW), which is indirectly attached to the prime minister's office.

The government's June 2024 ban on entering the border zone near Belarus affected NGOs that work on migration issues, requiring them to obtain a permit

from Border Guard commanders, who could grant or deny it at their discretion. The permits were typically issued for a specific area and duration. In May, prosecutors had filed an indictment charging five activists who provided humanitarian aid to migrants near the border with facilitating an unauthorized stay in Poland. The case was pending at year's end.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?	4/4
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Poland has a robust labor movement, though certain groups—including the self-employed, private contractors, and those in essential services—cannot join unions. Complicated legal procedures hinder workers' ability to strike.

F. Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?	2/4
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While in government, PiS took a range of steps to assert political control over the judiciary, including the irregular installation of progovernment judges on the TK and the transformation of the KRS from a body elected by fellow judges to one with a majority appointed by Parliament. In February 2024, the KO-led government presented an action plan to restore judicial independence and the rule of law. In July, Parliament passed a law designed to restore the independence of the KRS, which is responsible for nominating judges, but President Duda declined to sign it and instead referred it to the TK for review, meaning it had not taken effect at year's end.

In March, the Sejm adopted a resolution stating that a number of TK judges had been unlawfully appointed and requesting their resignation. It also challenged the legitimacy of the decisions made by these judges. Based on this resolution, the government stopped publishing the TK's decisions. In September, Parliament passed laws that would reform the TK, with provisions including new rules on

appointments and the formal invalidation of the improperly appointed judges and their rulings. However, Duda referred the legislation to the TK for review.

Also during the year, the government curbed the PiS-era practice of punishing judges for the content of their judgments through disciplinary actions, suspensions, or transfers to other courts. Existing disciplinary cases against judges who had challenged the former government’s judicial reforms were transferred to ad hoc disciplinary officers appointed by the new justice minister, Adam Bodnar. These officers dropped a number of cases, though in some instances, officers appointed by the previous justice minister refused to voluntarily hand over the case files. Bodnar also dismissed the presidents and vice presidents in dozens of lower courts, while many others resigned or retired; they had frequently been appointed by the former minister on the basis of political loyalty rather than merit and in some cases retaliated against judges who opposed the policies of the PiS government. The new court presidents installed by Bodnar were nominated by judicial assemblies.

Score Change: The score improved from 1 to 2 because the justice minister’s reform efforts effectively curbed the power of disciplinary officers and court presidents who had sought to punish judges for ruling against the former government.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?	3/4
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Defendants generally enjoy due process protections in Poland, though the law allows for extended pretrial detention, and there is a large backlog of cases. In May 2024, the government announced measures to reduce the use of pretrial detention, which has significantly increased in recent years.

The PiS government’s decision to merge the roles of justice minister and prosecutor general created a “potential for misuses and political manipulation” of the justice system, according to the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe. A draft law that would separate the two functions was presented by the government in July 2024.

In January, the justice minister removed Dariusz Barski as head of the National Prosecutor's Office, arguing that his 2022 appointment had been legally invalid. Following an open competition, a new national prosecutor was appointed in March. The Supreme Court in September upheld Barski's appointment, but the government maintained that the ruling had no legal effect, as it was issued by improperly appointed judges.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?

4/4

Civilians are largely free from extralegal violence, though incidents of abuse by police have been alleged. In May 2024, a man died after police allegedly shocked him multiple times with a stun gun, prompting the National Mechanism for the Prevention of Torture to highlight a lack of sufficient measures to prevent police mistreatment. Human rights groups have reported inadequate medical care, overcrowded cells, and other inhumane treatment in prison and detention facilities.

In July, Parliament approved a law that limited the criminal liability of Border Guard officers, police, and soldiers who violate rules on the use of firearms in certain circumstances related to the defense of the border. The law, which the president signed in August, drew criticism for infringing on the constitution and fundamental human rights norms.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?

2/4

Women and members of ethnic minority groups generally enjoy equality before the law.

LGBT+ people face discrimination. By the end of 2020, more than 100 local governments had declared themselves "LGBT-ideology-free" zones or established "family charters" through vague resolutions that rights groups described as hateful toward LGBT+ people. Administrative courts repeatedly ruled against such

declarations, and as of December 2024 just three of them remained in effect. That month, the Sejm began working on a bill that would add sexual orientation, gender, age, and disability to the categories covered by hate crime regulations.

In 2021, Parliament authorized border guards to forcibly expel migrants who had entered Poland illegally, after Belarusian security forces stranded large numbers of migrants and asylum seekers at the border under harsh conditions, encouraging them to cross. Warsaw's pushback policy continued in 2024, despite court rulings deeming it unlawful. A physical barrier constructed in 2022 did not stop irregular crossings; in December, the Border Guard reported that almost 30,000 people had attempted to cross the border during 2024. As of October 2024, at least 87 people had died in the border area between Poland and Belarus since September 2021, including 14 in 2024. In December, the government introduced a draft bill that would grant the Council of Ministers the authority to temporarily suspend the right to apply for asylum for 60 days, with potential extensions subject to parliamentary approval. The proposal was widely criticized by human rights organizations as incompatible with the constitution and international law.

The national government, local bodies, and citizens have offered significant support to Ukrainians fleeing the Russian invasion of their country. Ukrainians have significant rights, including to the labor market, though stateless persons arriving from Ukraine have less protection. As of December 2024, Poland hosted almost 992,000 non-EU citizens from Ukraine who were beneficiaries of temporary protection.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?

4/4

People in Poland typically enjoy freedom of travel and are able to change their residence, workplace, or institution of higher education.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?	4/4
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Citizens have the right to own property and establish private businesses. However, a 2016 law imposed onerous restrictions on the sale and ownership of agricultural land, ostensibly to protect small-scale farmers. State and religious institutions are not bound by the restrictions.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?	3/4
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Individual rights on personal status matters such as marriage and divorce are generally upheld. However, neither same-sex marriages nor civil partnerships are permitted, and same-sex couples are not legally allowed to adopt. Marriage is constitutionally defined as the “union of a man and a woman” under the “care and protection” of the state. In October 2024, the government introduced draft legislation that would allow civil partnerships, including for same-sex couples.

A TK ruling that banned abortion in cases where the fetus has a congenital disorder took effect in 2021. Consequently, legal abortion was limited to cases in which the pregnancy posed a danger to the woman’s life or health and cases involving rape or incest through the 12th week of pregnancy. Several women are known to have died since 2021 due to complications with their pregnancies after medical personnel did not perform abortions. In 2024, the government pursued decriminalization legislation and took other steps to address providers’ legal concerns. It issued guidelines for hospitals and prosecutors in August, specifying in part that an abortion to protect a woman’s physical or mental health is permissible, without the opinion of a second doctor. In September, the government revised a 2022 rule requiring doctors to record pregnancies in a national registry, leaving the decision to register up to the patient.

Since 2017, contraceptive pills have been available by prescription only. After the president's March 2024 veto of a bill that would have allowed access to emergency contraception without a prescription, the government implemented a program that allowed pharmacists to prescribe the medication without the involvement of a doctor.

In August, President Duda signed a law that changed the definition of rape to criminalize sexual intercourse without consent. Previously, the law had required force, unlawful threat, or deceit for the crime to be considered rape.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?

3/4

The law provides meaningful protections against abusive working conditions and child labor, especially in the formal sector. The authorities work to combat human trafficking, but women and children are still subjected to trafficking for sexual exploitation, and foreign migrant workers are vulnerable to conditions amounting to forced labor.



On Poland

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Country Facts

Population

36,820,000

Global Freedom Score

82/100 Free

Other Years

2024

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