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Social Mobility and Inequality in Poland after 1989

Mobilność społeczna i nierówności w Polsce po 1989 roku

Abstract

Poland has grown faster than any other European economy since 1989, yet it has shifted from being among Europe's most equal countries to one of its most unequal: the top one percent share of income more than tripled between 1983 and 2018. This paper reviews the fragmented evidence on social mobility and income inequality in Poland, drawing on sociology and economics as well as survey, tax and administrative sources. Social mobility remains moderately low, and inequality remains high. We identify the main data gaps, particularly on income, wealth and intergenerational links, and discuss reforms to taxation, access to education and the distribution of capital income.

Keywords: Poland, Inequalities, Social Mobility.

JEL: D31, J62

Streszczenie

Od 1989 roku Polska rozwija się szybciej niż jakakolwiek inna gospodarka europejska, ale z kraju należącego do najbardziej egalitarnych w Europie stała się jednym z najbardziej nierównych: w latach 1983–2018 udział jednego procenta najlepiej zarabiających w dochodzie ogółem wzrósł ponad trzykrotnie. Artykuł podsumowuje rozproszone wyniki badań socjologicznych i ekonomicznych nad mobilnością społeczną i nierównościami dochodowymi w Polsce oraz dane ankietowe, podatkowe i administracyjne. Mobilność społeczna pozostaje umiarkowanie niska, a nierówności wysokie. Wskazujemy główne luki w danych, zwłaszcza dotyczące dochodu, majątku i powiązań międzypokoleniowych, oraz omawiamy reformy podatków, dostępu do edukacji i rozkładu dochodów kapitałowych.

Słowa kluczowe: Polska, nierówności, mobilność społeczna

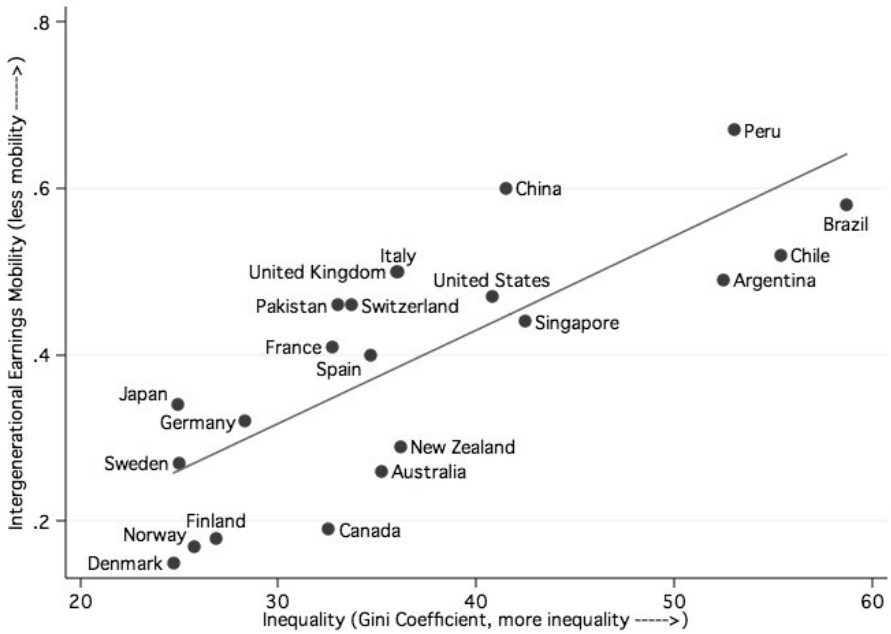
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1. Introduction

In a society with high social mobility, an individual's success is primarily determined by their actions rather than their background. The attainment of such a fair society is closely tied to the degree of socio-economic inequality (Krueger, 2012). Without governmental and institutional interventions that alter income and wealth distribution—such as taxation or public investment in education—high levels of inequality are associated with low social mobility, and vice versa, as reflected in the *Great Gatsby Curve* (figure 1). This relationship is descriptive rather than, by itself, causal (Durlauf et al., 2022), but it has been the motivation for a large amount of literature on the institutional and policy links between inequality and equality of opportunity (e.g., Corak, 2013).

Figure 1.
The *Great Gatsby Curve*: correlation between income inequality and intergenerational elasticity of income



Source: Reproduced from https://milescorak.com/2012/01/12/here-is-the-source-for-the-great-gatsby-curve-in-the--alan-krueger-speech-at-the-center-for-american-progress/

Since the 1980s, many countries have experienced rising inequality, although the magnitude and timing of these changes have varied considerably across countries. The increase was especially strong in the United States[1] and in post-socialist

[1] In the United States, the exact scale of the increase in inequality remains subject to debate (Auten & Splinter, 2024; Clarke & Kopczuk, 2025).

economies during and after the transition to the market economy. In parts of Western Europe, the rise was more modest (e.g., Elliot Major & Machin, 2018; Piketty, 2014; 2020; Bauluz et al., 2026; Guvenen et al., 2022). This has rekindled debates on the potential implications of this trend for equality of opportunity (Chetty et al., 2014), innovation (Bell et al., 2019), political choices (Autor et al., 2020), democracy (Gilens, 2012) and crime (Kelly, 2000). Overall, the literature tends to reject the long-held view of equity-efficiency trade-off, in favour of the view that economic growth can only be sustainable if coupled with high social mobility and low or moderate levels of inequality.

Poland serves as a particularly interesting case for studying long-term trends in social mobility and inequality. Its history of state formation, war, socialism, transition to capitalism, and EU integration offers a rich context for examining the impact of large institutional changes on income distribution. Poland has undergone rapid transformation from a planned to a market economy within a single generation, and has recorded the fastest economic growth in Europe since 1989 (Piatkowski, 2018). However, it has also transitioned from being among the most egalitarian countries in Europe to one of the most unequal. Between 1983 and 2018, the top one percent income share, for instance, more than tripled, from 4.2% to 13.4% (Bukowski & Novokmet, 2021; Bukowski et al., 2023).

This background paper provides a critical review of the existing literature on the evolution of social mobility and socio-economic inequalities in Poland. Its contribution is to synthesise and critically evaluate a fragmented body of evidence, much of which comes from various disciplines, data sources, and measurement traditions. We explore what insights can be gained from this literature and its limitations. The overall pattern emerging from the literature is that despite the country's Communist past, social mobility remains relatively low, income inequality is high, and income disparities are not simply a natural result of economic growth that will resolve themselves over time (Kuznets, 1953). Our analysis highlights Poland's increasing challenges of low social mobility and high inequality. We argue that policy and institutional reforms—such as increasing the progressivity of the personal tax system, ensuring equal access to quality education, and expanding the share of capital income received by lower income deciles—can help mitigate these issues.

However, due to the lack of high-quality administrative data on intergenerational links, the research on social mobility in Poland relies on self-reported survey data covering broad social groups. Consequently, the literature is significantly more developed regarding education and class than income and wealth transmission. As a result, our understanding of social mobility in Poland remains incomplete. Regarding income inequality, recent studies using combined tax and survey data have made significant progress, but important gaps persist – including the absence of reliable wealth inequality estimates and limited knowledge about the distributional role of capital income. We identify these gaps and suggest directions for future research throughout the paper.

2. Social Mobility

Based on the available evidence, Poland appears to have a moderately low level of intergenerational social mobility. This finding is based on a substantial body of sociological research in Poland, which primarily relies on survey data, self-reported parental backgrounds, and relatively broad categories for education or occupation.

Intergenerational social mobility can be analysed from two perspectives.[2] The first perspective, *absolute* intergenerational mobility, examines the likelihood of children achieving higher or lower outcomes compared to their parents, including in education, income, or social class. This approach measures generational improvements in outcomes but is also influenced by overall changes in the socio-economic structure. over the past thirty years, Poland has undergone significant changes, including because of rapid economic growth, expansion of higher education, and a shift from agriculture to manufacturing and services (Piatkowski, 2018; Bukowski & Novokmet, 2024).

To account for these broad socio-economic changes, the second approach is to construct *relative* measures of social mobility. Unlike absolute measures that look at direct improvements, like income increases, relative measures assess shifts in within-generation rankings, such as changes in income distribution positions. This type of mobility is typically assessed by analysing the correlation between children's outcomes (like education, occupation, income) and their parents' outcomes, adjusting for time or cohort effects. Generally, relative social mobility reflects the openness or fluidity of a society's structure.

Research on social mobility in Poland has so far largely focused on education, which is seen as a key factor in determining social status, influencing job opportunities and future earnings[3] (Tomescu-Dubrow, 2018). The World Bank's Global Database of Intergenerational Mobility (GDIM) presents evidence on the intergenerational transmission of education status for Poland and other countries using the data from the 2016 European Social Survey[4] (ESS) (Narayan et al., 2018; van der Weide et al., 2023).

Figure 2 presents data on absolute educational mobility in Poland compared to the OECD average. This measure focuses on the likelihood of children achieving a higher education level than their parents when parents do not have a university education. The data, covering individuals born from 1950 to 1980, shows that on average, children in Poland are better educated than their parents, with their schooling years being 47% higher than their parents. The probability that children surpass their parents in education is over 50% for all observed age cohorts and

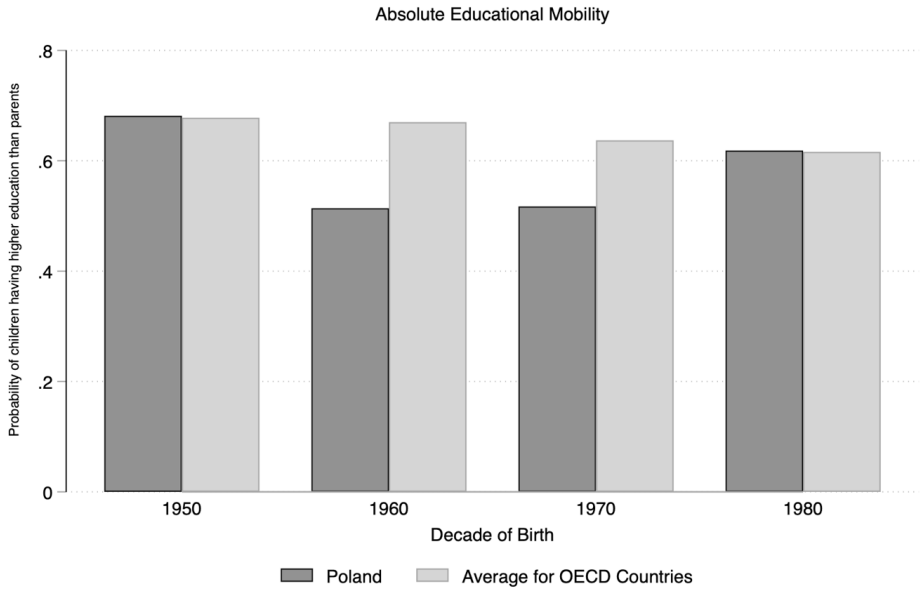
[2] For a methodological discussion on measuring social mobility see Corak (2013); Stuhler (2018).

[3] There is a big gap in the literature on social mobility in Poland due to lack of studies analysing income or wealth. The main reason is the lack of information on income/wealth or insufficient measurement of this in survey data. Unfortunately, due to the lack of high-quality administrative data linking children's income to their parents' income, there exists no high-quality study on intergenerational income mobility in Poland. Creating such data infrastructure should be a research priority.

[4] The European Social Survey is an international survey of attitudes, beliefs and behaviour patterns operated since 2001.

62% for Poles born in the 1980s. The social mobility of the oldest and the youngest age cohort is equal to the OECD average, while the social mobility of the two age cohorts born in the 1960s and the 1970s is lower.

Figure 2:
Probability that children born between 1950 and 1980 have a higher education level than their parents for Poland and OECD countries, measured in 2016

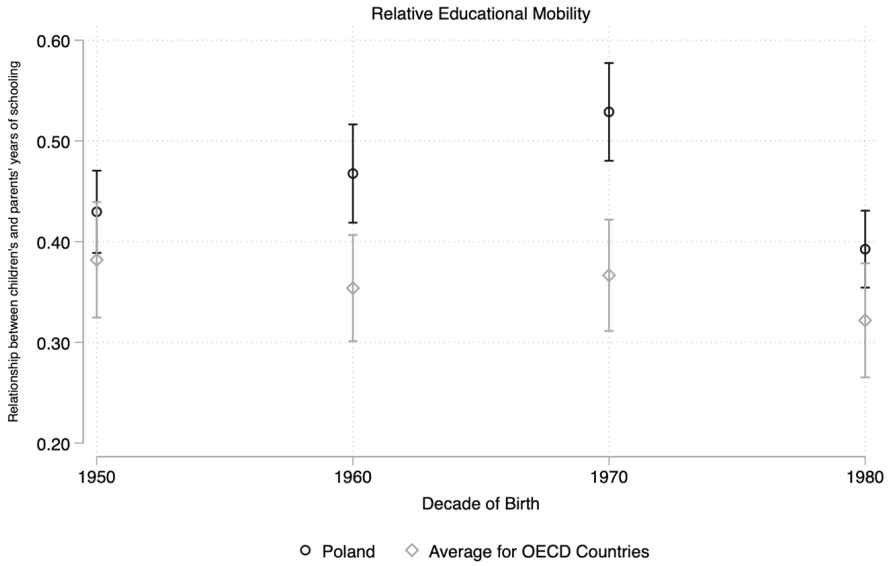


Source: own calculations using GDIM data.

Figure 3 presents the estimates of relative educational mobility, in particular coefficients from a regression of the number of years that children spend in education compared to their parents, and 90% confidence intervals. This measure nets out the effect of the overall increase in education through time and generations. Here, a higher coefficient implies lower social mobility, indicating a stronger link between the education levels of different generations. The findings show that for most cohorts, especially those born in the 1960s and 1970s, Poland's relative social mobility is lower (meaning higher coefficients) compared to other advanced economies.[5] However, there is a noticeable improvement for those born in the 1980s, where the educational social mobility rate is higher and not significantly different from other countries.

[5] Similar results are reported in Hertz et al., 2008, which use 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey.

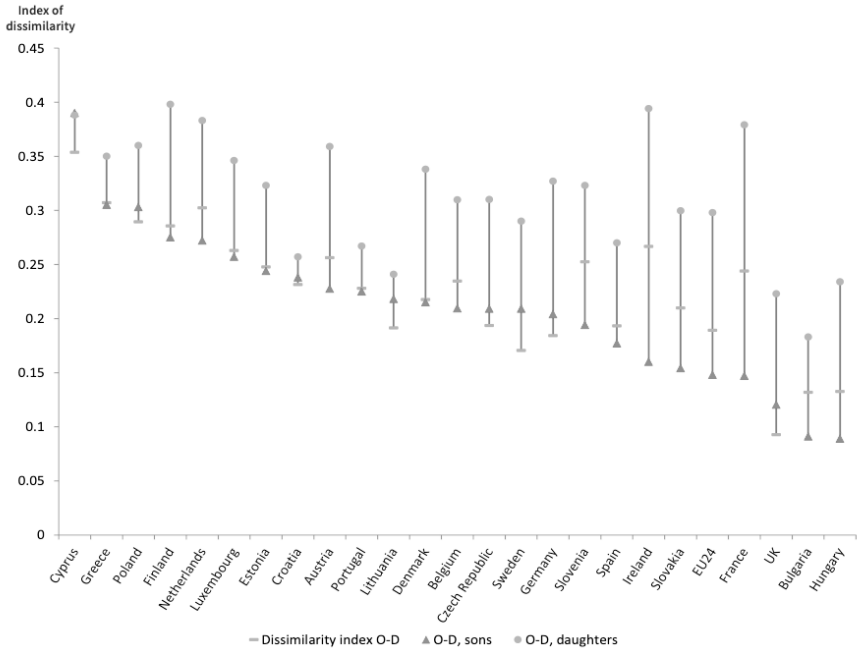
Figure 3:
Coefficient from a regression of the number of years that children spent in schooling compared to their parents in 2016, Poland and OECD countries.



Source: own calculations using GDIM data.

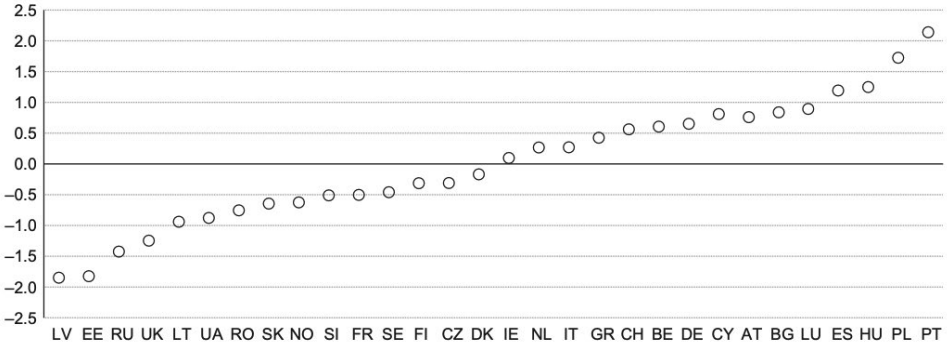
Bukodi, Paskov and Nolan (2020) analysed data from the European Social Survey (ESS) to assess intergenerational class social mobility among men in Poland and other European countries. in their study, class is defined based on occupation. Absolute rates of mobility show that from 2002 to 2010, over 70% of Polish men were in a different socio-economic class than their parents. Compared to the rest of Europe, this rate is relatively low but aligns with trends in other post-socialist countries. This result contrasts with Ludwinek, Anderson, Ahrendt, Jungblut and Looncikas (2017), who use earlier ESS data. They find that absolute class social mobility in Poland, as measured by the Origin-Destination Index of Dissimilarity, is relatively high compared to other countries (figure 4). In terms of relative measures of mobility, which adjust for changes in the class structure across generations, Bukodi et al. (2020) show Poland as one of the European countries with the lowest social mobility (Figure 5). This contrasts with other Central and Eastern European countries like Latvia or Estonia, which exhibit some of the highest rates of social mobility in the region. The results of low relative social mobility are in line with the evidence from Ludwinek et al (2017).

Figure 4:
Absolute rates of class social mobility.



Source: Reproduced from Ludwinek, Anderson, Ahrendt, Jungblut and Looncikas (2017, p.19). Note the figure dissimilarity index between class of origin and destination for parents and children. Higher values imply higher absolute class-based social mobility.

Figure 5:
Relative rates of class social mobility.



Source: Reproduced from Bukodi, Paskov, and Nolan (2020, p. 956). Note the figure shows the country-specific deviations from the cross-country average in class-based relative social mobility. Positive deviations indicate that the relative social mobility is low ("less social fluidity within the class structure", Bukodi et al. (2020, p. 957); negative deviations indicate that relative social mobility is high.

Other studies (Zagórski et al., 1984; Andorka & Zagórski, 1978; Domański, 1999; 2015; 2018; Mach, 2004; Barone & Ruggera, 2018; Domański et al., 2018; 2019; Tomescu-Dubrow & Domański, 2018) suggest that despite the post-1989 transition to capitalism, the resulting shift had a surprisingly limited impact on social mobility. Enduring class stratification might be a key reason for this, as the class structure in socialist Poland was pronounced and comparable to that in Western capitalist countries (Słomczyński & Shabad, 1997). There is also much debate as to the extent to which the Communist-era elite, or *nomenklatura*, retained their socio-economic status after the 1989 transition, with inconclusive results (box 1).

Box 1: Did the Communist *nomenklatura* retain its high socio-economic status after the 1989 transition?

Słomczyński and Shabad (1997); Mach (2000), Słomczyński and Tomescu-Dubrow (2018), argue that many *nomenklatura* members retained their high status as they transitioned into new roles as private sector entrepreneurs or managers. Tomescu-Dubrow and Słomczyński (2018) use POLPAN data to analyse class transition probabilities from 1988 to 2003. They find that an individual belonging to the *nomenklatura* in 1988 had, on average, a 20-times higher chance of becoming a highly skilled worker fifteen years later compared to other professions, and virtually no chance of descending to a low-skill worker role. In contrast, a blue-collar worker from the late Communist era had minimal chances of becoming an entrepreneur in 2003, and a peasant in 1988 had basically no chance of turning into an entrepreneur.

However, others argue the opposite: according to Berend (2009, p. 24), for instance, only 9 % of the Polish former Communist top party members held higher political offices after 1990, while the majority became 'déclassé'. Eyal, Szelenyi, and Townsley (1998, p. 199) estimate that less than 6 % of the Communist elite turned into entrepreneurs and only 1–2 % of them became top managers in business. Berend (2009, p. 244) posits that in Poland 'the transformation did not lead to the reproduction of the old power structure, and capitalism was built (. . .) "on the ruins" of [socialism]'. Szelenyi, Treisman, and Lipinski (1995) paint a similar picture. Finally, the EBRD (2016a) argues that the impact of having a parent in the Communist party on equality of opportunity in Poland was negligible.

This does not mean that communism had no effect on social mobility in Poland. using data from ESS, Barone and Ruggera (2018) demonstrated that the influence of social origin (such as a father's occupation) on educational outcomes decreased between those born in the 1930s, who were raised around the transition to communism, and those born in the 1960s, who were raised afterwards. However, for those born after the 1960s, there has been no significant improvement in social mobility. This pattern holds true not just for educational outcomes but also for class social mobility (Domański et al., 2016; Ludwinek et al., 2017). A similar trend is

[6] The Polish Panel Survey POLPAN, organised by the Polish Academy of Sciences. Starting in 1988, it is one of the longest running panel of individuals in Europe.

observed in other regional countries. For instance, as reported in Bukowski, Clark, Gaspar and Peto (2022) for Hungary, social mobility - measured by changes in occupational status of privileged groups – accelerated from 1950 to 1980 but then stagnated or declined.

Finally, one must point to important differences across genders. While social mobility for men initially improved with the onset of communism but then stagnated or worsened in the later years and during the transition period, the situation for women was different. According to Mach (2004), intergenerational class social mobility for women improved between the 1970s and the 1990s. We can hypothesise that this was related to the expansion of education, leading more women towards general (non-vocational) secondary education (Sawiński, 2018). Another factor was the promotion of female labour force participation during the Communist era, and evolving social norms regarding women's roles in the economy (Ludwinek et al., 2017).

The Polish experience aligns with that of other Central and Eastern European countries (Bukowski & Earle, 2026). A broader lesson from the comparative post-socialist literature is that significant institutional changes do not necessarily lead to large shifts in relative mobility. Even where socialism, transition, and marketisation significantly altered economic structures, intergenerational persistence often remained considerable.

However, the existing evidence on social mobility in Poland is subject to several important limitations. First, all available studies rely on survey data with relatively small samples, which provide information on broad social groups but cannot capture finer patterns of intergenerational transmission. Second, there are no studies of intergenerational income mobility in Poland, primarily because no dataset links children's income to their parents' income. Third, there is no administrative data (such as linked tax records across generations) that enable the kind of high-quality estimates available for the United States (Chetty et al., 2014) or Scandinavian countries (Mogstad et al., 2025). Future research should prioritise the creation of such data infrastructure.

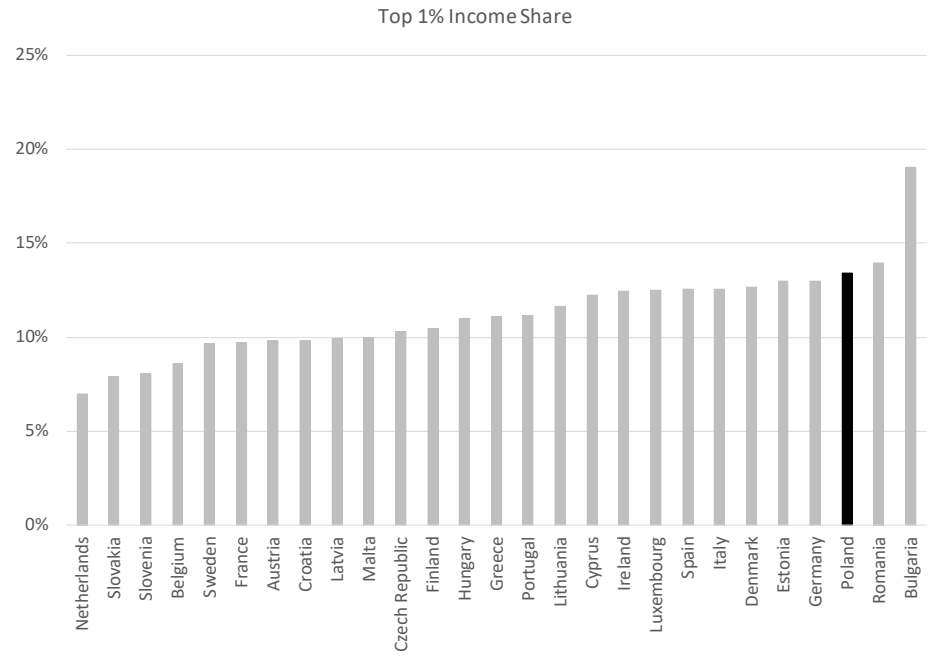
3. Income and Wealth Inequalities

Bukowski and Novokmet (2021), as well as Bukowski, Chrostek, Novokmet, and Skawiński (2023), argue that Poland is among the countries with the highest economic disparities in the European Union, using cross-country comparable measures (figure 6). These estimates are broadly comparable to Distributional National Accounts (DINA) – the main international standard for measuring inequality - but they do not use exactly the same income concept. In particular, Bukowski et al. (2023) focus on pre-tax fiscal income and therefore depart from the DINA definition of pre-tax national income in some respects, including the treatment of imputed rental income of homeowners, income retained in businesses, paid corporate income taxes, or employers' social security contributions. Figure 6 uses World Inequality Data on pre-tax fiscal income (not harmonised with DINA) and was constructed using

concepts similar to those in Bukowski et al. (2023).[7] However, since there are still methodological and tax-law differences across countries, this comparison should be approached with caution.

In 2018, the share of pre-tax income accrued to the top 10 % was 37.4%, to the middle forty percent it was 41.1%, and to the bottom 50 % only 21.5%. The top one percent earned 13.4% of the total income (Bukowski et al., 2023). When compared with data from the World Income Database (figure 6), which uses the same methodology, Poland's level of inequality is similar to that of Germany, where the top one percent earns 13% of total income, and the UK, with 13.8%, but is considerably higher than in France (9.7%), Hungary (11%), or the Czech Republic (10.3%). Poland's level of inequality, as defined in these studies, is nonetheless below the levels seen in Russia or the United States, where the top one percent captures more than 20% of total income.

Figure 6:
Top one percent income share in Poland and in the EU, 2018



Source: Data for Poland: Bukowski et al. (2023); Data for other countries: World Income Database.

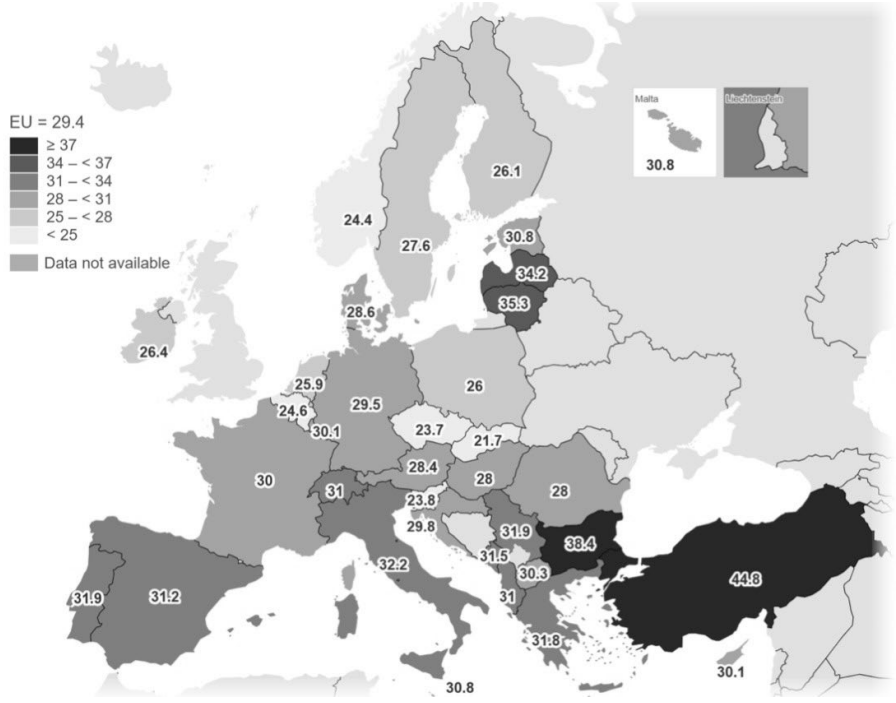
In contrast, in 1989, Poland was among Europe's most egalitarian countries, with the top one percent earning less than 5% of total income (Bukowski &

[7] The World Income Database estimates for Poland are based on the estimates in Bukowski and Novokmet (2021).

Novokmet, 2021; World Inequality Database). For comparison, at the same time the top one percent share in France stood at approximately 9%, in the UK at 10%, and in Germany at 11% (World Inequality Database). As highlighted by Bukowski and Novokmet (2021), the ensuing three decades saw significant increases in inequality, particularly during two key periods: immediately after the transition from communism to capitalism, and post-2004, coinciding with Poland's entry into the EU. The initial surge in inequality was an expected outcome of the shift to a market economy and related free-market reforms. The increase in inequality after 2004 is attributed to the growing importance of capital income. The rich in Poland today are mostly business owners, and this group is one of the main beneficiaries of the robust economic growth since 2000.

The above estimates of income inequality stand in contrast with the official measures of inequality published by Eurostat and the Polish Statistical Office. According to them, Poland's level of income inequality measured by Gini coefficient declined from 31.1 in 2011 to 26.3 in 2022. In 2022, the coefficient was below the EU average (29.6) and among the lowest coefficients in the EU (figure 7).[8]

Figure 7:
Gini coefficient for equivalised disposable income per inhabitant, 2024



Source: Eurostat([ttps://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_li41__custom_18893793/default/tablenilc_di12])

[8] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tessi190/default/table

Nevertheless the official estimates are based only on household survey data, which do not capture the richest individuals and thus underestimate the true level of inequality (Bukowski & Novokmet, 2021; Bukowski et al., 2023; Brzeziński et al., 2021; Atkinson et al., 2011; Burkhauser et al., 2018).[9] The estimates for Poland by Bukowski and Novokmet (2021) avoid this problem, by combining the survey data with tax data, which better capture the income of the most wealthy. There is ongoing work by the statistical offices, including the ONS in the UK,[10] to upgrade the methodology and the data sources accordingly.

Redistribution system

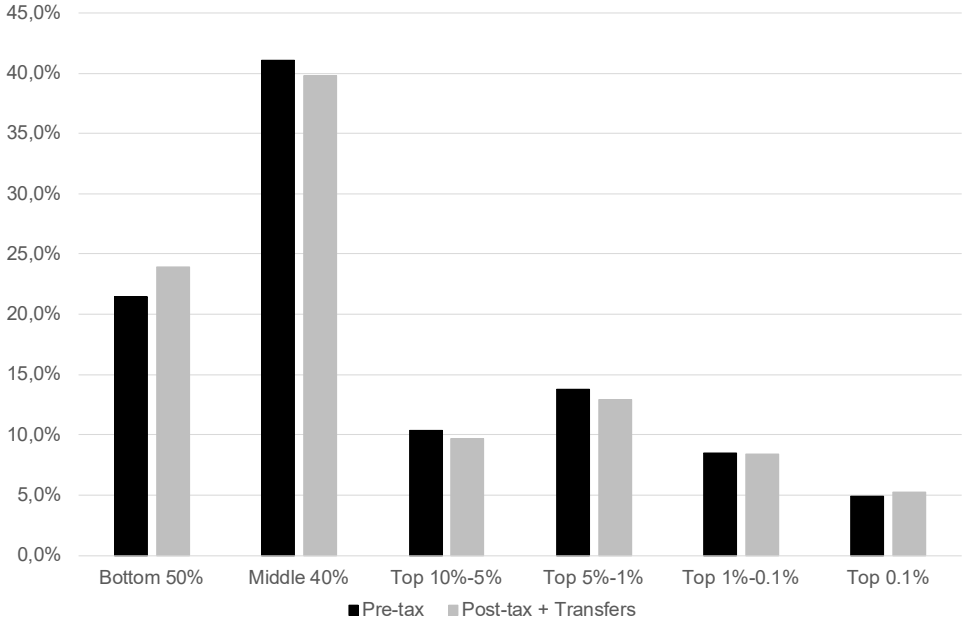
The income redistribution system in Poland has had a limited effect on the country's income inequalities (Bukowski et al., 2023; Brzeziński et al., 2022). Rather than mitigating disparities, the system tends to benefit both those who are poorest and those who are wealthiest, often at the expense of middle-income groups (figure 8). For example, in 2018, after accounting for taxes, social security, health contributions, and social benefits, the top one percent of earners had a post-tax income share of 13.6% (0.2 pp higher than pre-tax); Meanwhile, the bottom 50 % saw their share rise to 23.9% (2.4pp higher) and the middle 40 % experienced a decrease to 39.8% (1.3pp lower). The Polish PIT system in 2018 was regressive for the top incomes, because individuals with high business income could choose to be taxed using a linear tax rate of 19%, rather than a progressive rate of 32%. Those with labour income, who are more likely to be found in the top 10-1% group, did not have this option. In addition, social security contributions were also regressive: wage earners paid contributions as a percentage of earnings, but capped at a certain level, and business owners paid a flat (income-invariant) contribution.

In other words, this pattern suggests that the Polish tax-and-transfer system does relatively little to compress disposable-income inequality at the top. This weak redistribution may have implications for future social mobility in Poland. If the tax and transfer system does not offset the advantages that accrue to higher-income groups — particularly through business income and capital accumulation — these advantages can be transmitted across generations, reducing intergenerational mobility. However, recent research suggests that predistribution — policies shaping the distribution of market incomes before taxes and transfers, such as education, labour market regulation, and minimum wages — may be even more important than redistribution in explaining cross-country differences in inequality (Blanchet et al. 2022; Mogstad et al. 2025). This implies that addressing low social mobility in Poland requires attention not only to the tax and transfer system but also to the underlying market institutions that generate unequal incomes in the first place.

[9] See also https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/capturing-top-incomes-and-measuring-inequality--europe

[10] https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/nationalaccounts/uksectoraccounts/compendium/economicreview/february2020/topincomeadjustmentineffectsoftaxesandbenefitsdatamethodology

Figure 8:
The effect of redistribution of income shares in Poland, 2018



Source: Bukowski et al (2023)

Bukowski et al. (2023) also highlight the significant geographic and gender dimensions of income inequality in Poland. The national top one percent of earners are predominantly found in large cities, while there a growing presence of high-income individuals in rural and semi-urban areas. Since 2000, high-income groups have consistently been male-dominated, with a higher male percentage in the narrower top income groups. Males also account for approximately 75% of business income. Remarkably, the gender income gap is about 33%, and it remained largely unchanged between 2000 and 2018.

The evidence on wealth inequality in Poland is more limited. The study by Brzeziński, Sałach and Wroński (2020) shows that in 2016 the top 10 % of the wealthiest households in Poland held 41% of the total wealth, while the bottom 20 % owned just one percent. Interestingly, these figures are relatively low when compared to other European countries, with only Slovakia reporting lower levels of wealth inequality. The discrepancy between income and wealth inequality in Poland may be attributed to the nature of wealth accumulation, and it could take several decades for high levels of income inequality to translate into significant wealth disparities.

4. Conclusions

Our review suggests that Poland's economic success since the 1989 transition — during which it has more than tripled its GDP per capita PPP and become the fastest growing economy in Europe — has been accompanied by growing income inequality and persistently low social mobility. If not addressed, low social mobility may undermine Poland's income convergence with the West in the future.

Two significant implications stem from the evidence discussed above. First, further research is required to enhance measurement, particularly for social mobility, primarily because Poland lacks linked administrative data on parent-child income and wealth. Additionally, improving official statistics on income and wealth inequality — including better utilisation of personal income tax data — is vital for informed policy discussions. Consequently, enhancing measurement should be a priority in its own right.

Second, comparative literature indicates that lower inequality and greater equality of opportunity rely not only on redistribution via taxes and transfers but also on predistribution: the institutions shaping market incomes before taxes, including education systems, wage-setting bodies, and access to valuable assets. In this respect, the main policy lesson from the Polish case is not a single reform but the necessity to think holistically about inequality, opportunity, and the institutions that influence both. In our view, the areas where Polish policymakers should start a serious debate are reforms of the personal tax system[11] and improving teachers' training and increasing teachers' wages to attract more skilled individuals to the profession.[12]

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[11] By increasing the effective tax rates for higher-income earners, employed and self-employed, and for accumulated wealth, especially real estate (Piketty, 2014; 2020, Chrostek et al., 2019; Doligalski, 2019; Bukowski et al., 2023).

[12] See Bukowski (2019) on the quality of teachers, OECD (2021); Sawiński (2018) on educational inequalities (which are currently moderate to high) and Bukowski and Kobus (2012); Bukowski (2020); Paczos et al. (2023). which makes the recent trends such as the expansion of private education and the reduction in comprehensive education duration even more concerning (Bukowski & Sobotka, 2019).

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