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# **Migration of the Poles to Slovakia after World War II**

The article presents post-war migrations of the Poles to Slovakia, both during the period of existence of the Czechoslovakia and after the Velvet Revolution that led to the creation of independent Slovakia on January 1, 1993. The state has not too often been the direction of Polish emigration. The Poles in Slovakia constitute a sparse and highly dispersed population. The results of the 2011 census showed that only 3,084 people claimed to be of Polish nationality. The decision to settle in Slovakia quite frequently stems from the fact of finding a spouse of Slovak nationality in this country. As a result, the descendants of Polish citizens coming to Slovakia are brought up in bicultural, Polish-Slovak families.

*Key words:* Polish immigrants, the Poles abroad, Slovakia, mixed marriages

## **Миграције Пољака у Словачку после Другог светског рата**

У раду се разматрају миграције Пољака у Словачку у периоду после Другог светског рата – у време постојања Чехословачке, као и након Плишане револуције, која је довела до стварања независне Словачке 1. јануара 1993. године. Словачка није била уобичајени смер кретања пољске емиграције. Пољаци у Словачкој представљају проређену и високо дисперзовану популацију. Резултати Пописа из 2011. године показују да се само 3,084 људи изјаснило да је пољске националности. Одлука о пресељењу у Словачку често произилази из чињенице да је тамо пронађен супружник словачке националности. Резултат тога је да су потомци пољских грађана, који су се преселили у Словачку, одгајани у бикултурним пољско-словачким породицама.

*Кључне речи:* пољска имиграција, Пољаци у иностранству, Словачка, мешовити бракови

## **Introduction**

Over the last centuries Poles very often left their country. This emigration was not always voluntary. Its directions and scale varied over periods. The origins of mass Polish emigration date back to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when three partitioning powers – Russia, Prussia, and Austria divided Poland. Political and economic factors were its two primary motives. It is worth remembering, however, that quite often these reasons occurred simultaneously in different combinations. Some-

times political emigration was transformed into economic migration. Subsequent waves of emigration from Polish lands, and since 1918 onwards from the reborn Republic of Poland, shaped the Polish diaspora in the world.

Different terms are used to describe Polish communities outside the country. These include the following notions: “Polish emigration”, “exile”, “Polish minority”, “Polish diaspora”, or “Polish community abroad”. The latter started to be used in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Originally, it was popularized by Polish economic emigrants in America. Over time, the term “Polonia” began to be referred not only to the group of Polish emigrants but also to Polish national minorities living in various countries of the world. Nowadays, the term “Polonia” (or “Polonia and the Poles abroad”) is most frequently found in the official nomenclature. On the other hand, the term “Polish diaspora” is more popular with academic researchers and some officials. It is worth adding that not all Poles living abroad accept applying the term “Polish community” to them. Representatives of Polish communities in Lithuania, Latvia, Belarus, and Ukraine, as well as in Cieszyn Silesia (in its Czech part, that is commonly referred to in Poland and by the Polish minority in the Czech Republic as Zaozlie), consider the land on which they and their ancestors were born to be their own. Therefore, they cannot be regarded as exiles from Poland since they have never left it. They found themselves outside the country not of their own free will but in the effect of the change of borders. For those reasons, the term “Polonia” also does not apply to those residents of the former Eastern Borderlands of the Republic of Poland, who were forcibly deported to the Asian part of the then USSR (mainly to Kazakhstan and Siberia). As far as the Poles living in the Soviet Union today are concerned, the notions of “the Poles from the East”, “the Poles from beyond the eastern border of Poland”, “the Poles in the East”, “the Poles from beyond the Bug River” or, more generally, “the Poles from abroad” or simply “Polish minority” are applied (Lesińska 2018, 310; Nowicka 2000, 8–9).

In the modern world, the Polish diaspora is one of the largest communities in exile. According to Polish authorities (the Senate of the Republic of Poland and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), the diaspora amounts to between 12 and 16 million people, considering the number of subsequent generations already born in exile. However, it is quite difficult to determine the number of Polish emigrants precisely. That is due to the lack of a single method that would be considered objective for estimating the size of the diaspora and to the adoption of quite diverse criteria for qualifying individual persons to a specific ethnic group. Various methods for counting foreigners, including those of Polish origin, are used in different countries. The criteria most frequently used to determine the number of the Poles living outside their home country include citizenship, country of birth, mother tongue, second and third generation origin, as well as manifesting and declaring the Polish national consciousness. As Hieronim Kubiak points out, one should also bear in mind the fact that “most of the people belonging to the Polish community are not considered to be the Poles today and cannot be identified as such. Not only are they usually loyal citizens of other countries, but also members of other nations, who, although to varying degrees, have maintained respect for the culture of the country of origin and understanding of its national interests” (Kubiak 1976, 61). Differences in the

estimates of the number of Poles living in the world today result from the adopted criteria for Polishness. For example, will we consider only people born in Poland or their descendants (and if so, to which generation?) as the Poles, or will we say so about everyone who has Polish parents, or only about those who have kept the Polish national consciousness and feel Polish? (Kubiak 2005, 204; Lesińska 2018, 311).

Polish emigrants settled on all continents. As a result, today there is no country in the world where the Poles would not live. The largest Polish communities are in the United States, Germany, Brazil, Ukraine, France, and Belarus. One of the less numerous and at the same time less known Polish communities are the Poles in Slovakia. They most often use the terms “Polonia” about themselves.

### **Migrations of the Poles to Slovakia in the past and today**

Slovakia was not and is not a very often chosen destination of the Poles' emigration. Therefore, despite the geographical proximity of both countries, the Slovak Polonia, being a small community and living in considerable dispersion, remains relatively little known and researched. The Poles in Slovakia are untypical emigration since it is not of a political (forced) nature nor is it caused by historical events. Today, there are two main groups among the Poles living in the Slovak Republic: indigenous people and immigrants who came here in the twentieth century and at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The indigenous people of Polish descent live primarily in the Polish-Slovak borderland, especially in the Spiš, Orava, and Czadecki region. However, today's inhabitants of those regions consider themselves, first of all, to be “mountain people”, i.e., highlanders (ethnonym: Góral / Goral), and only in second place they describe themselves as the Slovaks or the Poles. Long-lasting assimilation processes have led to the fact that at present hardly anyone in Slovakia admits to the old, autochthonous Polishness. Nowadays, a relatively highest percentage of the Slovak population declaring Polish nationality lives in these areas (districts of Tvrdošín, Námestovo, Dolný Kubín in Orava, as well as Stará Ľubovňa, Kežmarok and Poprad in Spiš). However, in terms of numbers, these concentrations are few, amounting up to 140 people in the Kežmarok district (according to data from the 2011 census) (SODB 2011). The small size of the Polish autochthonous population in the Spiš and Orava regions and its similarity to the culture of Slovak highlanders proved conducive to the progress of assimilation. According to Zenon Jasiński it resulted from the low sense of national consciousness and the policy of degeneration conducted in the interwar period by the Czechoslovak authorities. The above was manifested, among other things, by the ban on the activities of Polish organizations and schools in those regions, as well as by the fact that the right of permanent residence was not granted to persons declaring their Polish nationality. These legal impediments led the Poles to acquire Czechoslovak citizenship and, over time, also Slovak nationality (Jasiński 2001a, 271).

The second group of the Polish population in Slovakia is made up of emigrants, mainly from Poland, but also from the Czech Republic, who came there in the 20th and early 21st century. The first wave of Polish emigration took place in the years 1890–1910 and concentrated on the areas of eastern Slovakia. The settlers came mainly from Małopolska, especially from the following districts: Jarosław, Sambor, Nowy Sącz, and Nowy Targ (Jasiński 2001b, 153–154).

The period of World War II is worth mentioning when describing the further history of the Poles in Slovakia. The Poles protected themselves on the other side of the Tatra Mountains against repressions in occupied Poland. Moreover, some soldiers of the Polish Army were interned in Hungarian camps in southern Slovakia, occupied by Hungary in 1939. Polish military camps were established in 34 towns, and 13 of them accepted Polish civilians in an organized way. After the end of the war, some Polish soldiers and civilians stayed in Slovakia and founded families there (Jasiński 2001b, 153–154; Gniazdowski 2010, 38–39).

After the Second World War another wave of Polish emigration took place. This process intensified especially in the seventies and eighties. In the years 1973–1981, every year between 80 and 120 Poles settled in Slovakia, and in the following years – an average of 80 Poles. The Poles came to Slovakia under contracts that were particularly attractive in the seventies. Their conclusion was possible thanks to the signing of bilateral government agreements between the People's Republic of Poland and the Czechoslovakia. The Poles arriving in Slovakia at that time came from virtually every region of Poland. Most of them were from southern Poland. Post-war emigration of the Poles to Slovakia resulted mainly from economic and personal reasons (the so-called “heart emigration”). The economic situation in the People's Republic of Poland forced some people to seek work abroad. Czechoslovakia, just like Poland, was in the block of socialist countries. However, its economic situation and access to goods, such as food products or housing, encouraged people to seek better living conditions. Therefore, the Poles arrived in Slovakia to earn money. Some of them, having met their life partner there, got married and stayed there permanently. Comparison of the economic situation in both countries often influenced the mixed marriages’ decisions to settle in Slovakia. Another reason was the willingness to study in this country. In this case, some of the Polish students, having met their future spouse and/or found a job during their studies, stayed in Slovakia. Thus, student centers (in Bratislava, Košice, Banská Bystrica, Žilina, Martin and Nitra) became their places of residence. Some of the Poles settling in Slovakia came there as part of migration within the Czechoslovakia. These included, among others, the Poles from Zaolzie. The Czech Poles chose Slovakia for the same reasons as their Polish compatriots – for work, studies or for marrying a Slovak national (Jasiński 2001b, 163–165).

The influx of the Poles to Slovakia never took on a mass character. The results of subsequent post-war censuses confirm that the Polish community in this country is small and lives in considerable dispersion. In the last census in 2011, 3084 persons with permanent residence on the territory of the Slovak Republic declared their Polish nationality. The Poles live in each of the 79 Slovak districts, thus constituting from 0.02 to 0.31 % of the total population. A significant feature of the

Polish community in Slovakia is the quantitative advantage of women over men. According to the 2001 census, they constituted as much as 70 % of the total population declaring Polish nationality. The Poles living in Slovakia have mostly Polish citizenship – as was stated in 2011 by 2375 people, i.e., 77% of 3084 people who declared Polish nationality in the census. The detailed data on the number of people of Polish citizenship in Slovakia after the Second World War are presented in the table below.<sup>1</sup>

Year of census	1950	1961	1970	1980	1991	2001	2011
Number of the Poles	1.808	1.012	1.058	2.053	2.659	2.602	3.084

Tab. 1. Citizens of Polish nationality in Slovakia according to post-war censuses

The number of the Poles in Slovakia started to increase after Slovakia's accession to the European Union on May 1, 2004, due to the opening of the Slovak labor market among others for the Poles. Under the Treaty of Accession of the Slovak Republic to the European Union as of May 1, 2004, citizens of the European Union and the European Economic Area gained full access to the Slovak labor market. Detailed data on the number of foreigners employed in the Slovak Republic are published monthly by the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic. They show that from Slovakia's accession to the EU until the end of 2016, the number of Polish citizens taking up employment in Slovakia showed a steady upward trend. While at the end of 2004 there were only 331 of them, in December 2016 their number was already 3204 people. Nonetheless, starting from 2017, a downward trend can be seen – in January 2019, the Slovak labor ministry registered the presence of 2573 Polish citizens employed in Slovakia (UPSVAR 2019).

Post-accession emigrants arriving from Poland to Slovakia differ in many respects from pre-accession emigration. The analysis of the official data shows, first of all, entirely different proportions between the number of men and women in relation to the data from recent censuses. According to the results of the 2001 census, Polish women accounted for as much as 70% of the total population of persons declaring Polish nationality (SODB 2001), whereas, in January 2019, 70% of Polish citizens employed in Slovakia were men (UPSVAR 2019). The above is mainly because in recent years most of the available job offers are addressed primarily to men (e.g., in the IT, construction, transport and automotive industries).

Post-accession emigration to Slovakia is also distinguished by the fact that its main reason is not “heart cause” but work. The Poles coming to Slovakia to get a job are mostly young people. Among them, there are either persons with single status, or being in a one-nation marital relationship (with a Polish). There are still

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<sup>1</sup> The data covering the years 1950, 1961, 1970 and 1980 were taken from: Jasiński 1992, 699. The data covering the years 1991, 2001 and 2011. were taken from: Obyvateľstvo SR podľa národnosti..., tab. 10.

those who, like pre-accession emigrants, decide to enter into mixed, Polish-Slovakian, marriages. Nevertheless, it happens that the marriages are resettled for professional reasons to Poland (or another country). In the era of people's free movement within the EU, some Poles taking up employment in Slovakia treat this country as one of the stages of "emigration career" and not as a place of permanent residence. The advantage of working in the southern neighbor – in comparison with the situation of emigrants leaving for, e.g., the British Isles – is the lack of more firm cultural barriers, including language similarities, between the Poles and the Slovaks. Moreover, not without significance is geographical proximity that enables more frequent and cheaper trips to family and relatives in the country than it is in the case of emigration to the states of the so-called old Union (EU-15). Therefore, statistically speaking, job offers in the country on the other side of the Tatra Mountains are more frequently benefited from by residents of the southern Polish voivodships – Śląskie, Małopolskie, and Podkarpackie (Wojcieszńska 2011, 12–13).

### **Migrations of the Poles to Slovakia in the light of our research**

The empirical research concerning the representatives of Polish emigrants in Slovakia was carried out in the years 2002-2003, as part of a doctoral thesis entitled: *"Polonia in Slovakia. Location. Culture. Identity. Sociological study"* (published in: Lubicz Miszewski 2012). They were pioneering, as they were the first sociological studies of this Polish community. They included representatives of two generations: "the adult members of Polonia" and "the Polonia youth". The basic criterion for this division was not so much age, but above all the respondents' belonging to either the first or the second generation of the Slovak Polonia.

In the case of "the adult Polonia", namely the first generation of the Slovak Polonia, it was decided to use open interviews with a standardized amount of information sought as a research tool. A total of 91 interviews were conducted in this group of respondents. On the other hand, the study of "the Polonia youth", i.e., the second generation of the Slovak Polonia, was carried out based on a questionnaire. The survey covered 62 people.

The research addressed all the most important concentrations of the Poles in Slovakia. The respondents, both adults and young people, were selected purposefully. The first group of both generations were the Poles associated with the only Polish organization<sup>2</sup> at that time, which was the "Polish Club – Association of Poles and their Friends in Slovakia" established in 1994. At the time of the survey, it had five regional branches – in Bratislava, Nitra, Košice, Martin and Middle Považie. In the second group of respondents – also from both generations – there were the Poles who were not members of the Polish Club. Most of them came from Liptov as well as Spiš and Orava areas. In total, out of all 153 adult and youth respondents, 72 people, that is 47%, could participate in the Club's activities, with their place of res-

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<sup>2</sup> The second Polish community organization in Slovakia, the Social Society "Polonus", associating the Poles from the Žilina Region, was established in 2007, i.e., a few years after the end of the research.

idence in Slovakia taken into account, while 81 people, 53%, were deprived of this possibility.

When undertaking empirical studies, it had not been assumed that both generations were to be considered symmetrically and hence described comparatively. The aim was to present the position, culture, and identity of the Slovak Polonia, based on the example of two significantly different generations. A different number of respondents in both groups, as well as the use of different research methods, made it impossible to compare the two communities under study.

The research shows that the vast majority of adult respondents consider themselves to be the Poles, thus admitting their Polish identity and treating Poland as their first homeland. The main reason for this was the fact that most of the adult respondents (91.2%) came from ethnically homogenous marriages, were born in Poland (95.6%), and left for Slovakia only as adults. The surveyed representatives of the adult Polish community mainly declared Polish identity and – to a much lesser extent – Polish identity aiming at a two-way identity<sup>3</sup>. As Andrzej Chodubski put it, *Polish identity* is characterized by people who maintain close contacts with the Polish community, treat Polish as the basic language in everyday communication, and are attached to national and patriotic values. On the other hand, people who identify themselves with Polishness, but are not perceived by their environment as such, show a Polish identity aiming at a two-way identity. That is due to the high degree of assimilation and adaptation in the new country of residence (Chodubski 1998, 9–11).

The Polish language plays a special role in maintaining the Polish national identity. Bilingualism is quite a common phenomenon in Polonia homes. It appears a necessity since the Poles in Slovakia mostly live in mixed families. There were only two respondents out of 78 married couples, who were living in nationally homogeneous (Polish) marriages. Most of the surveyed representatives of the first generation of the Slovak Poles indicated Polish as their mother tongue learned at home. For them, it remains the first language, although not devoid of numerous influences and borrowings from the Slovak language (resulting mainly from the proximity of Polish and Slovak words).

During the interviews, some respondents pointed out the importance of the Polish Club for the maintenance of Polish identity and integration of the Poles in Slovakia. Both in the years 2002–2003 and at present, the scope of its impact is limited. Therefore, only the inhabitants of those regions where the Club has regional branches can participate in its activities. The Poles, scattered in towns located far from one of these local clubs, do not have the opportunity to join the Polish community initiatives systematically. It is worth noting that for some of them the club meetings are the only chance to talk in their native language, which they are de-

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<sup>3</sup> *Two-way identity* is typical of those who treat Polish identity as a private matter and “outside” associate themselves with the values of the country of settlement and are well adapted to it. This identity is characteristic for well-educated people, open to civilization changes and multicultural life (Chodubski 1998, 10).

prived of daily. Members and supporters of the Polish Club emphasized the role of this association in the integration of the Polish community, teaching the Polish language (within the framework of the so-called Polish language schools), maintaining Polish culture, and helping in the daily life of the Poles in Slovakia. The latter, in terms of their rights and practical guidelines on the realities of functioning in the country). On many occasions the respondents also spoke positively about the “Monitor Polonijny” – a monthly edited in Polish and published since 1995 by the Polish Club. They emphasized its role in the integration of the Polish community in Slovakia, e.g., by presenting events and activities in individual regional branches of the Polish Club.

What distinguishes the second generation of the Slovak Polonia from the first generation in the light of the research carried out? It is clear that the identity among the surveyed representatives of the Polonia youth is shaped differently than in the case of adult Polish immigrants. The majority of 62 youth respondents were born in Slovakia (82%) in mixed marriages (93.5%). It is not surprising, therefore, that only three of them declared that they consider themselves the Poles. Eight persons announced themselves to be the Slovaks only (12.9%). The great majority of the respondents, on the other hand, had a double identity, considering themselves either the Poles – Slovaks (51.6%) or “the Slovaks of Polish descent” (22.6 %). Therefore, while most adult respondents declared the Polish national identity, the self-determination of one's own identity was much more diverse among the Polonia youth.

Furthermore, the surveys conducted among the young members of Polonia show that the Polish language is treated as a second additional language that helps communicate with grandparents and family in Poland or with a parent of Polish descent. It is interchangeable that among 62 respondents no one spoke only Polish at home. Knowledge of the Polish language is perceived as an asset, creates prospects for better employment or the chance to study in Poland. However, it is the Slovak language that is the essential tool of everyday communication for young respondents is. It is much closer to the respondents than the Polish language. Mastering the Polish language in writing is a problem for as many as 80% of the respondents, and only 20% admitted that they wrote flawlessly in Polish. It is not surprising, therefore, that only 30% of the respondents decided to fill in the questionnaire in Polish (the remaining respondents chose the Slovak version of the poll).

In the light of the results obtained, it can be concluded that the second generation of the Slovak Polonia either has a dual identity, i.e., a bicultural (two-way) one or is geared towards the Slovak national identity. According to Roman Dzwonkowski, a bicultural identity is characterized by a strong identification and integration with one's own and a foreign culture, with simultaneous acceptance of both cultures. Bicultural people identify themselves with the dominant culture as well as with the culture of their ethnic group, and thereby they participate in both cultures. It should be stressed that biculturality is not uniform; the power of identification of bicultural persons with each culture is usually asymmetrical; rarely do both cultures have the same value for the individual. Bicultural people usually take an option as the basic one, that is the one which plays a dominant role in their ethnic identity



(Dzwonkowski 2002, 23). Identification with the Slovak culture is much stronger in the case of young respondents who declared a bicultural identity. The respondents are aware of their partly Polish origin, but Slovakia, as their country of residence, as well as the Slovak culture and language, is much closer to most of the young respondents. Therefore, the Slovak culture is accepted as the basic culture, namely the one which plays a dominant role in the process of shaping the national identity of the youth.

## Conclusion

Polish emigrants in Slovakia, compared to their compatriots leaving for many other countries, are in a somewhat privileged situation. That is mainly due to the geographical and cultural proximity of Poland and Slovakia. Not without significance is also the mutual affection between the two nations, as well as the fact that the Polish-Slovakian neighborhood is considered to be the most non-conflicting (especially in comparison with Poland's relations with other neighbors).

The Poles in Slovakia constitute, for the most part, young, two – or three – generation emigration. They do not form dense concentrations, as they are a small and scattered community throughout the country. According to one assimilation law formulated in 1912 by Otto Bauer, its pace depends on the continuity of emigration. The communities constantly renewed by subsequent emigrants assimilate more slowly than those who are deprived of such an inflow. According to other laws proposed by the author, the smaller the share of migrants in the total population and the more dispersed the settlement of immigrant communities, the faster assimilation process (Bauer 1912, 246–263; Wasilewski 1928, 18–21, 34–35). The constant inflow of the Poles to Slovakia throughout the post-war period makes it easier for them to maintain their national identity.

The inflow of post-accession emigrants from Poland to Slovakia inspired further research. They were carried out at the turn of 2016 and 2017 with the use of a questionnaire sent via e-mail and Facebook. In this way, answers were obtained from 94 respondents. The surveyed, except for one person, were under 40 years of age. They lived in the largest Slovak cities – 60% of the respondents indicated Bratislava, while a total of 31% of them reported one of the towns where universities are located – Košice, Prešov, Banská Bystrica, Nitra, Žilina, Martin and Ružomberok. The most frequently declared reasons for coming to Slovakia were work and studies (as reported by 81% of the respondents). Among the Poles arriving in Slovakia after May 1, 2004, there are still people for whom the motivation for coming to Slovakia is the so-called “heart emigration” – a relationship with a Slovak man or woman. The reason mentioned above was stated by 20 respondents.

Despite their small number and significant dispersion, the Poles in Slovakia are quite well organized in institutional terms. The above is evidenced, among other things, by the activities of two Polish organizations existing in the country – the “Polish Club” and the “Polonus”. It is worth noting that the inflow of further emigrants from Poland (especially after May 1, 2004) contributes to the “rejuvenation”

and revitalization of both these associations. Obviously, due to their limited territorial scope, they do not cover all Polish emigrants in Slovakia. Nonetheless, the Poles who are not members of any of these organizations are not totally prevented from the possibility of maintaining ties with other compatriots. The Internet plays an important role in this respect. As Piotr Siuda aptly pointed out, “cyberspace is a critical place where national identity manifests itself. It is in it that people articulate it and through this, they recreate this subjective sense of belonging to a certain nation, a sense of separation from others” (Siuda 2008, 130). For Polish emigrants in Slovakia, the Internet makes it easier for them to establish and maintain contacts with the Poles living in that country temporarily or permanently. What is more, it significantly facilitates virtual communication with compatriots remaining in their country of origin. That is evidenced, among others, by texts and posts published on Internet portals (such as *polonia.sk*), as well as on groups and profiles created on social networking sites.<sup>4</sup>

When bearing the mind the whole post-war period, it can be expected that Slovakia will remain one of the directions of the Poles’ emigration, although it will still be a niche direction. Attractive job offers (e.g., in international corporations), remuneration paid in euros, the cultural and geographical proximity of Poland and Slovakia, as well as Polish-Slovakian relations will remain decisive factors in choosing this country. Therefore, it seems justified to continue the research of this small Polish community. It would provide an opportunity to answer questions about the identity of emigrants, how their assimilation takes place, as well as how their influx affects the functioning of the “incumbent” Polish community. The in-depth analysis of the content posted by emigrants in virtual space would prove helpful in the research. That would make it possible to explain the role of the Internet in preserving the national identity of the Poles living in Slovakia and maintaining ties with their compatriots.

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<sup>4</sup> E.g. [facebook.com/KlubPolskiBratyslawa](https://www.facebook.com/KlubPolskiBratyslawa), [facebook.com/KlubPolskiKosice](https://www.facebook.com/KlubPolskiKosice), [facebook.com/obcianskezdruzenie.polonus](https://www.facebook.com/obcianskezdruzenie.polonus), etc.

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