

## POLISH CULTURAL HERITAGE AS A BRIDGE OF IDENTITY: THE ROLE OF TRADITION IN PRESERVING TIES WITH THE DIASPORA

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**Abstract:** Polish cultural heritage constitutes an indispensable narrative in the dissemination of authentic and distinctive values aimed at strengthening ties with the extensive Polish diaspora worldwide. This paper seeks to further contribute to migration studies and critical heritage studies by adopting an anthropological perspective on the role and modalities of heritage use in the process of diaspora formation. Particular emphasis is placed on the integration of tangible and intangible heritage into a coherent set of cultural values, which plays a significant role in the constitution and preservation of a distinctive cultural identity. Through sociological and anthropological reflections on cultural identity, the authors, across several analytical iterations, elucidate the relationship between Polish cultural heritage and identity. The foundational level encompasses everyday practices, such as the use of language, while the subsequent level operates within the policy domain and is shaped by processes of diaspora integration and by efforts to implement cohesive activities that gather and sustain the Polish diaspora, taking into account multicultural determinants that vary in scope and intensity across different national contexts. The commemoration of Polish national and religious holidays, as well as the maintenance of cultural practices, alongside the continuous enhancement of the scope and quality of bilingual education with multigenerational participation, constitutes a relevant response to the strong pressures of globalization and assimilation. Further strengthening of ethnic identity, particularly in countries where the Polish immigrant community is not numerically significant, presupposes additional support and resources from the country of origin.

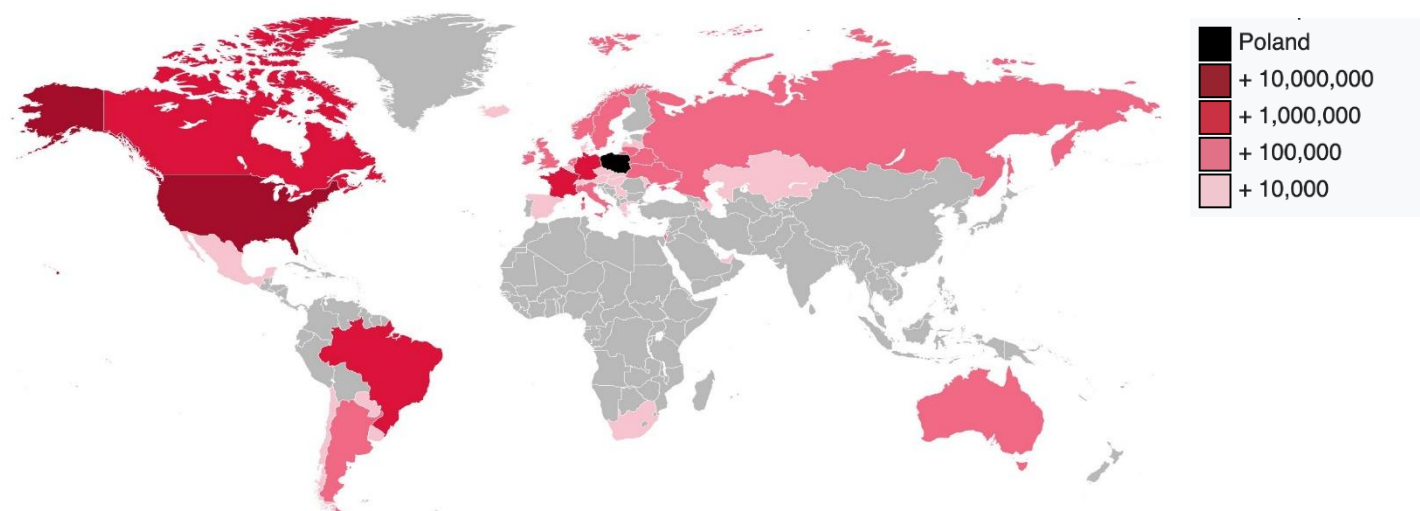
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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Polish diaspora represents one of the most demographically widespread diasporic communities at the global level. Estimates indicate that more than 21 million people of Polish origin live outside the borders of Poland, forming a dense network of communities that continuously maintain and transmit Polish tradition, culture, and national identity. This global “Polish footprint” exerts a visible influence on economic, political, and social processes in various parts of the world, with Poland’s accession to the European Union in 2004 marking a turning point in the transformation of contemporary migration flows. In the period that followed, a significant increase in the number of Polish migrants was recorded, particularly in the United Kingdom and Ireland, where their population approaches nearly one million. In Germany, the presence of approximately two million residents of Polish origin is estimated, while in the United States around 10 million citizens identify as being of Polish descent (Hussain, 2025). Polish immigration to Canada occurred in several waves, from the period of the partitions of Poland to the contemporary era, and Polish Canadians today constitute a relatively small but historically significant ethnic community. Although highly assimilated, Polish immigrants and their descendants continue to strive to preserve their linguistic, cultural, and religious identity, a process facilitated by the Canadian model of multiculturalism, which affirms cultural diversity and supports education in heritage languages. The preservation of the Polish language among second- and third-generation members depends primarily on family strategies and institutional support, with university-level heritage language programs playing an important role. Within the context of Canada’s multicultural society, proficiency in the Polish language represents an additional cultural and professional asset, particularly in sectors such as healthcare, law, and business communication (Lustański & Stroińska, 2024).

Today, the Polish language is actively used in a large number of countries, which is a direct result of the efforts of numerous diasporic communities to preserve their linguistic heritage and cultural identity across spatial and generational distances. Despite the structural and social challenges faced by migrant families, research points to predominantly positive attitudes toward the Polish language, as well as to the cultivation of bilingualism and hybrid linguistic and cultural identities among younger generations (Romanowski & Seretny, 2024). Contemporary Polish communities in the diaspora are characterized by relative stability and a high degree of organization, and in many countries, such as the United Kingdom, Ireland, Iceland, and Norway, they constitute one of the largest national minority groups.

*Figure 1. Map of the Polish Diaspora*



Source: Hunter, A., 2020

Kopyś and Gajda (2025) argue that migration significantly reshapes identity and cultural landscapes, enabling migrants not only to preserve but also to reinterpret their own cultural heritage as a mechanism for adaptation and negotiation within new social contexts. The transformation of this heritage reflects the dynamic and adaptive character of migratory processes, through which a hybrid identity is formed that balances Polish cultural roots with integration into the host society. In this sense, cultural heritage functions as a living resource that contributes to the strengthening of a shared sense of belonging, social cohesion, and the development of intercultural dialogue.

An anthropological perspective, which focuses on social and cultural phenomena grounded in human activity, places particular emphasis on the practices and everyday activities of the Polish diaspora within newly defined social and cultural spaces. Attention is directed toward understanding culture as a system of meanings, manifested through customs, traditions, and heritage as interpreted by the Polish diaspora, as well as through contextualization, whereby the activities of the Polish diaspora are assessed in relation to their historical, socio-cultural, and economic relevance. This approach acknowledges that culture, by its very nature, is not a matter of static moments but of dynamic processes, the rhythm and exponential nature of which are best understood through migration processes and the relational dynamics between the country of origin and the diaspora.

In order to strengthen the cultivation of diasporic identity, countries of origin may implement a range of measures, among which particular importance is attached to the dissemination of knowledge about the homeland. This is primarily achieved through the provision of education in national history and language, as well as through the participation of migrants in the commemoration of national, religious, and other cultural events. Such practices confirm that culture represents one of the key instruments for establishing and maintaining continuous relationships between migrants and their countries of origin (Gsir & Mescoli, 2015).

Cultural heritage thus represents not only a component of identity but also a valuable developmental resource. Ferreira Fernandes Okom (2025) emphasizes that over the past two decades, digitalization has acquired particular significance as a means of cultural preservation and as a driver of innovation and branding. In this context, it is evident that new technologies are transforming the relationship between local communities and global audiences. Consequently, it may be concluded that digital heritage contributes to the preservation of collective memory and further strengthens ties with the diaspora.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In contemporary research, cultural heritage is recognized as a significant driver of economic development, as it contributes to shaping high-quality visitor experiences, creates favorable conditions for employment, and represents a key resource in the preservation and promotion of a desirable cultural identity. Owing to the complex historical processes and socio-political transformations that have marked the development of the Polish nation, issues of identity and its protection have continuously occupied a central place both in the public sphere and in the everyday lives of Poles (Sančanin & Penjišević, 2025). Research on Polish migration is characterized by pronounced theoretical and methodological diversity, often extending beyond the boundaries of classical migration studies.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly focuses on individual migration experiences, migrants' subjective perceptions and attitudes, as well as on social interactions within host societies. A particular segment of this body of research addresses language learning and family communication within the Polish diaspora, highlighting their dynamic and evolving nature in the migratory context. In this process, digital technologies, together with a wide range of mobile applications and social media platforms, play a significant role in facilitating and intensifying communication among family members living in different countries (Kędra et al., 2021).

Analyzing the significance of travel and gastronomy as key connective elements between the Polish diaspora in the United Kingdom and the country of origin, Joanna (2015) emphasizes that, in addition to religion and language, traditional Polish cuisine plays a particularly important role in preserving the identity of first-generation migrants, while its symbolic significance gradually diminishes in subsequent generations. Although identity is subject to continuous transformation, the author argues that food remains the most widespread, and in certain cases the only, recognizable marker of Polish identity already among members of the second and third generations of the diaspora. In contrast to migration patterns characteristic of certain European countries, where migration is often interpreted through the concept of "temporary residence," the Polish immigrant community in Australia represents an example of a permanently settled diaspora that has been substantially integrated into the host society, while simultaneously retaining certain recognizable elements of an authentic Polish identity. Markowski and Kwapisz Williams (2013) suggest that Australia's geographical remoteness may have contributed to the acceleration of assimilation processes, as well as to the gradual, and in some respects irreversible, loss of national identity. Within this context, numerous research avenues are identified for examining migration flows, settlement patterns, and processes of adaptation among traditional immigrant communities, such as the Australian Polonia. This community comprises permanent residents of Australia of Polish origin who remain strongly connected to Polish culture and tradition, as well as those who clearly and unequivocally identify as members of the Polish diaspora.

In this regard, the use of space should be analyzed as a key mechanism for the preservation of a specific ethno-cultural identity in the diaspora, that is, as a process of constituting a distinctly "Polish" place shaped by Polish migrants and their descendants in Sydney. Drozdowski (2007) emphasizes that different groups of Poles contextualize their diasporic identity and attribute meanings to space in diverse ways, and that, despite social and historical changes over time, they continuously (re)constitute Bjelani as a central site of recreational and social activities. Spatial concepts manifested through participation in shared activities, patterns of ownership and care for a common Polish place, as well as strong emotional attachments to that space, indicate a pronounced orientation toward a collective, symbolically marked Polish place and a deep connection between the community and it.

Goldstein and Matras (2024), in their study, examine the Polish language as a key diasporic marker in the urban context of migrants in the United Kingdom. Drawing on an analysis of statistical data on language preferences and self-declared linguistic practices, as well as longitudinal ethnographic observations, the authors explore the role of the Polish language in shaping everyday social interactions, stable social ties, and spaces of communication within the Polish immigrant community. They particularly emphasize that language choice is neither neutral nor easily substitutable, but may perform a constitutive function in social practices by endowing them with a performative character, or alternatively a secondary one, when its symbolic role is limited. The authors identify the diffusion of linguistic features across diverse social practices, thereby highlighting language as an important co-defining indicator in the formation and maintenance of diasporic communities.

Dzięglewski (2023) examines the role of Polish immigrant organizations with a cultural profile, artists working abroad, and migrant communities within the organizational field encompassing systemic activities aimed at promoting Polish culture beyond the borders of the home country. The author analyzes relevant strategic documents that shape the directions of cultural policy and diaspora policy. He concludes that, despite the declarative recognition of the diaspora's potential by policymakers, there remain limited opportunities for consistent and institutionally grounded support of promotional activities carried out by immigrant organizations and Polish artists abroad. Representatives of the diaspora thus remain marginalized within the organizational field oriented toward building a national brand through culture, even though they possess significant capacities stemming from the size and dispersion of the Polish diaspora.

Kowalska (2012) argues that awareness of the importance of knowledge about cultural heritage today transcends the boundaries of intellectual elites, and that cultural heritage is increasingly recognized as a key factor in socio-economic development, as well as a medium of communication in societies and regions burdened by ethnic and religious conflicts. In the context of globalization, the Americanization of everyday life, and the dominance of mass culture, the author highlights the growing need to reaffirm unique cultural phenomena of the past as expressions of cultural diversity. Particular attention is devoted to processes of deculturation and the diffusion of cultural patterns, emphasizing that the preservation of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage constitutes a complex and multilayered task, fraught with numerous cultural, legal, and institutional dilemmas at national, regional, and local

levels. In this respect, the book *Cultural Heritage in Poland – the Background, Opportunities and Dangers* is directed toward analyzing open and ambivalent questions in the protection of Polish cultural heritage, rather than providing a descriptive account of individual cultural assets.

Elgenius (2017) advances the thesis that the activism of the Polish diaspora constitutes a significant civic space of migrant engagement, simultaneously linked to the civil society of contemporary Poland and to diasporic structures formed in the host country. The author demonstrates that the Polish civic space in the United Kingdom developed through three major migration waves and is strongly structured by divergent “desires for return,” which vary across generations and social strata of Polish migrants. These diverse aspirations generate a specific, multi-phased pattern of civil society development, within which identity, belonging, and status are negotiated from a minority position, while co-ethnic organizations remain central actors of ethnonational solidarity, political mobilization, and symbolic recognition within the diaspora.

The historical context and the profound influence of Catholicism on contemporary Poland are indisputable, particularly within the complex interactions of religious and cultural processes in Eastern and Central Europe. In this regard, Porter-Szücs (2011) analyzes the post-communist relativization of Wrocław’s cultural identity, underscoring the importance of a critical and responsible approach to the interpretation of historical narratives.

### **3. INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT FOR THE PRESERVATION OF POLISH IDENTITY IN THE DIASPORA**

History and heritage, as the core of Polish national identity, are increasingly prioritized and reinterpreted in order to enhance traditions and values, affirm the social order, and cultivate a sense of community. These elements are of particular importance to the Polish diaspora, as they direct attention toward cultural identity and a return to tradition, dignity, and pride, while simultaneously pointing to shared beliefs and sentiments across different generations of the diaspora (Kowalski & Modellmog-Anweiler, 2025).

Poland possesses longstanding experience in shaping and implementing policies directed toward the diaspora, traditionally referred to as *Polonia policy*. Although the contemporary framework of diaspora policy has been developing since 1989, it was only between 2011 and 2015 that reform processes intensified. The changes, aimed at a fundamental transformation of objectives, organizational structures, and key actors of diaspora policy, were of such scope that this period is defined in the literature as the establishment of a “new” *Polonia policy*. In this context, Nowosielski and Nowak (2017) emphasize that the central principle of the “new” public diaspora policy rests on the adoption of the concept of new diaspora governance by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, both at the planning stage and during policy implementation. The authors interpret this approach as a response to broader structural transformations affecting public administration and fiscal policy in Poland, but also as an opportunity to redefine the fundamental premises of state policy in line with the altered perception of the dominant objectives of diaspora policy.

Gońda et al. (2023) observe that Poland has undertaken a series of public diplomacy measures to build its credibility on the European and global stage. The establishment and support of “Polish Studies” programs at foreign universities is regarded as a particularly significant instrument in the process of creating a positive image and increasing knowledge about Poland worldwide. In practice, however, the primary target audience of these activities is not necessarily the international public, but rather the Polish diaspora itself.

The primary objectives of Poland’s diaspora policy are directed toward ensuring conditions under which members of the diaspora and Polish citizens abroad can fully exercise their rights in their countries of residence, with particular emphasis on the preservation, development, and promotion of Polish national and cultural identity. Within this framework, the strategic goals encompass systemic support for Polish education, culture, and tradition; the encouragement of active participation of the Polish diaspora and Poles abroad in the social and public life of their host countries; and the cultivation of enduring ties with the homeland, including the promotion of return migration to Poland. The objectives of the Government of the Republic of Poland regarding the diaspora and Poles abroad are defined through several legislative and strategic documents, among which the Government’s Strategy for Cooperation with the Polish Diaspora and Poles Abroad for the period 2025–2030 occupies a central place (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland, 2024). This strategic document underscores that the demographic dynamics of Polish society and the continuously developing economy have resulted in significant labor market shortages, and that Poles abroad should be considered a target group for addressing these challenges, given that they represent a relevant human resource whose professional knowledge and skills, as well as cultural values, can contribute to the modernization of the Polish economy, compensate for the lack of innovative and creative ideas, and remedy insufficient competencies identified in the Polish labor market (Dz. U. poz. 887, 2024).

Analyzing Poland’s diaspora policy and the system of social protection for Polish citizens living abroad, Lesińska and Wróbel (2020) emphasize that engagement policy rests on five key areas: employment, healthcare, the pension

system, family benefits, and the provision of minimal social resources. The authors conclude that the fundamental aim of Poland's diaspora policies is the integration of heterogeneous and territorially dispersed Polish communities abroad, while simultaneously preserving and strengthening national identity and promoting the Polish language and culture among Poles living outside the homeland. Nowosielski and Raczyński (2025) examine the role of migrant organizations in ensuring the social and cultural security of migrants, with particular focus on Polish migrant organizations in the European context. Based on extensive empirical research conducted in nine European countries, the authors demonstrate that these organizations possess significant potential in safeguarding the cultural security and ethnocultural identity of Polish migrants, while their contribution in the field of social protection remains considerably limited. This discrepancy between the cultural and social functions of migrant organizations points to structural weaknesses in existing diaspora policies. The authors therefore stress the need for targeted political interventions that would strengthen the capacities of migrant organizations to provide concrete social support, in line with the actual needs and expectations of the Polish diaspora.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Cultural heritage, as an inseparable link between tradition and identity and the processes of their preservation and reinterpretation, plays a central role in strengthening ties with the extensive Polish diaspora. At the same time, it reflects the interweaving of two parallel processes: adaptation to a transformed sociocultural context and a new social reality, and the formation of a hybrid identity that reconciles the legacy of the past with the complex integrative dynamics of the host society. Within this framework, discourse on Polish cultural heritage has increasingly attracted academic and institutional attention and has been affirmed as an authentic bridge to the multi-million-strong diaspora, with this complex and dynamic potential assuming a key function as a durable and cohesive connecting factor. The Polish diaspora plays a significant role in the preservation and reproduction of cultural identity, as well as in strengthening a sense of belonging, through the continuous cultivation of national customs and traditions, language, and cultural heritage, alongside the implementation of cultural exchange activities and active participation in the social life of host countries. In this way, a numerically substantial and institutionally and socially robust diaspora functions as a recognizable carrier of cultural continuity and visibility, which is of particular importance for maintaining identity ties among members of the second and third generations of Polish immigrants. Continuously evolving narratives of belonging within the Polish diaspora therefore merit further scholarly investigation and critical reflection, particularly with regard to challenging the illusion of homogeneity in inherited traditions, culture, and customs among presumed members of the community.

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