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The World and the Pandemic – Socio-Economic Challenges for Poland

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Abstract

The article presents the major economic and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland, with particular emphasis on the situation of businesses, changes in the labor market, and the functioning of the education system. The analysis is framed within the context of global transformations triggered by the pandemic and post-pandemic periods and their impact on the national situation. Examination of primary sources – including key statistics, legal acts, and research findings – made it possible to identify the most significant challenges for Poland's socio-economic development in the coming years. Drawing on global experiences in responding to the pandemic, as well as lessons learned from previous global economic crises, the article formulates recommendations for Polish public policy – including economic, labor market, and education policies. The main challenge in the economic sphere remains overcoming the economic slowdown and supporting entrepreneurship in the context of a digital economy and rapid technological change. This requires prioritizing investment support policies and strengthening

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educational measures, including lifelong learning, adapted to the evolving demand for skills.

Keywords

pandemic Covid-19, economic policy, labor market, education policy

Introduction

According to Karl Popper, “(...) aim of science to find satisfactory explanations, of whatever strikes us as being in need of explanation (...) an explanation in terms of testable and falsifiable universal laws and initial conditions. (...) the conjecture that it is the aim of science to find satisfactory explanations leads us further to the idea of improving the degree of satisfactoriness of the explanations by improving their degree of testability, that is to say, by proceeding to better testable theories; which means proceeding to theories of ever richer content, of higher degrees of universality, and of higher degrees of precision.”¹ Małgorzata Czarnocka complements Popper’s definition by writing: “The aims of science arise from human needs. These needs constitute the most primordial layer conditioning science by generating its aims and, consequently, co-shaping it at the most elementary level – namely, the very essence of science. The problem of the aims of science therefore refers to the issue of human needs fulfilled through science.”²

The knowledge provided by science, as well as scientific discoveries, allows us to better understand the world around us, even though science often does not offer simple solutions – especially in times of upheaval, unexpected crises, or wars. One such extraordinary moment in human history was the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, which led to a global disruption of social and economic life, resulting in the most severe worldwide recession since the Great Depression. In Poland, the economic shutdown began in March 2020. The picture of the economy that emerged from research conducted across various scientific disciplines was alarming. The Polish people had never faced such an economic and social situation during any of the crises that had affected society since the political and economic transformation.

There emerged a need to diagnose ongoing phenomena and to develop solutions (recommendations) that could minimize the often tragic consequences of SARS-CoV-2, as the pandemic re-

1. K. Popper, *Objective Knowledge. An Evolutionary Approach*, Clarendon Press 1979, pp. 191–193.

2. M. Czarnocka, *Cele nauki a potrzeby ludzkie*, “Zagadnienia Naukoznawstwa”, 2011, No. 3 (189), p. 414.

vealed the close relationship between health security and economic security, both of which had a strong impact on public spending and the condition of national economies. From the very beginning, representatives of various scientific disciplines attempted to describe and explain the unfolding events. Naturally, the expectations of individuals, societies, and policymakers were most often directed toward doctors and, more broadly, the healthcare system – particularly scientists specializing in medicine (virology and epidemiology) – as those who had the most to say about containing the spread of the epidemic (over 500 million infections globally) and treating infected patients. Their efforts led, among other outcomes, to the development of the COVID-19 vaccine, which gave people around the world hope for overcoming the deadly virus. In Poland, the pandemic deepened the problem of the so-called “health debt,” reducing access to many medical procedures and diagnostic visits. This debt, resulting from the inefficiency of the public healthcare system, has led to neglect in the treatment of chronic diseases. Consequently, it has become necessary to increase the effectiveness of health policy, as its shortcomings and errors can further exacerbate this problem.

The medical aspect of the crisis was only one element in the fight against the effects of the pandemic. New and significant challenges emerged for researchers in other fields of knowledge, particularly for scholars in economics, law, and the social sciences, who had to describe in real time the problems resulting from lockdowns and the ensuing economic and social crises, while seeking optimal solutions that could help restore a sense of “normalcy” in the world. Of course, restoring this “normalcy” does not depend solely on scientists, but also on society – especially on policymakers and their willingness to engage with research-based recommendations from the scientific community. An example of such studies is the research on the socio-economic challenges related to the pandemic, focused on identifying risks at both the national and global levels, conducted by the Department of Labor System and Labor Market at the Faculty of Political Science and International Studies of the University of Warsaw under the direction of Professor Jacek Męcina. The findings of this research form the basis of the present study.³

The aim of this article is to diagnose the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Poland’s socio-economic condition, particularly focusing on the functioning of enterprises, the labor market, and the education system, as well as to identify the key challenges this poses for public policy. The main research problem is the question of the directions and methods of state intervention aimed at preventing economic and social crises amid global instability, economic uncertainty, and technological revolution. The analysis is based on an institutional approach that draws on

3. The article draws on joint research and analyses by Jacek Męcina and Przemysław Potocki. See: J. Męcina, P. Potocki, *Wpływ COVID 19 na gospodarkę i rynek pracy w Polsce – wyciąg z raportu badawczego*, Open Eyes Economy Summit 2020, <https://hub.oees.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Eksperytyza-11.pdf>, (access 17.11.2025).

Initial Phase of COVID-19 Pandemic

existing source data, including secondary analysis of research findings, available statistics, and scholarly studies.

According to data from the World Health Organization (WHO), the global onset of the pandemic can be traced back to the identification and isolation of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in China in early January 2020, followed by the first confirmed coronavirus cases outside China – in Thailand, Japan, and South Korea. On March 11, 2020, when nearly 1,000 cases had been recorded in China, the World Health Organization officially declared COVID-19 a pandemic. The first official case of coronavirus infection in Poland was publicly announced on March 4, 2020. However, simulations conducted by Polish epidemiologists suggest that the epidemic likely began in the second half of January 2020. From early March, Poland – like most EU countries – began implementing the first preventive measures aimed at reducing the risk of infection.

Parallel to the fight against the pandemic in the fields of medicine and epidemiology, national governments – as well as international organizations such as the European Union and the United Nations – launched initiatives to mitigate its economic and social consequences. The scale of the non-medical negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic can be illustrated by the example of China, where between early January and the end of February 2020, five million people lost their jobs.⁴

The economy – not only in China but globally – quickly lost its adaptive capacity due to politically driven decisions aimed at “freezing the economy,” and restoring economic growth in the short term (within less than a year) became impossible.⁵ In its April 2020 report, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) outlined three possible development scenarios for economic growth for the years 2020–2024. In each of these scenarios, the global economy fails to return to its pre-pandemic equilibrium. Such a trajectory of global economic processes through 2024 implies a reduced capacity to absorb potential labor resources in national labor markets and, consequently, a rise in registered unemployment levels.

The steady rise in infections during the fourth quarter of 2020 and the unfavorable forecasts predicting continued risk in the following year indicated that national and global economies could enter a phase of deep, prolonged recession, with an uncertain timeline for returning to pre-pandemic equilibrium. The pandemic and resulting lockdown disrupted existing trends in the labor market as

4. E. Cheng, *Roughly 5 million people in China lost their jobs in the first 2 months of 2020*, CNBC 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/16/china-economy-millions-lose-their-jobs-as-unemployment-spikes.html>, (access 06.04.2020).

5. This hypothesis was confirmed by an analysis based on a neo-Keynesian model conducted by two European researchers, Luca Fornaro and Martin Wolf. See: L. Fornaro, M. Wolf, *The Scars of Supply Shocks*, CEPR Discussion Paper No. DP15423, 2020, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3737556, (access 01.10.2025).

a consequence of changes occurring both in the economy and in social life. The health factor associated with COVID-19 introduced a sense of uncertainty not only among employees – due to fears of job loss, wage reductions (e.g., resulting from shutdowns), the shift of professional activities to home environments, and changing employer expectations toward new, primarily digital, competencies – but also among employers, who faced broken supply chains, liquidity problems, difficulties in selling goods and services, and the need to acquire software necessary for remote work. The hospitality, food service (forced business closures), and transportation sectors were hit particularly hard. However, since these industries account for a relatively small share of GDP, their impact on its overall decline was limited.

The Impact of the Pandemic on the Economy

By the end of the second decade of the 21st century, one of the defining features of the modern world was globalization – ensuring the free flow of capital, people, information, culture, and goods. Its acceleration was largely driven by the revolution in information technology (ICT, the Internet, automation, digitization, and robotics), which made it possible to reach even the most remote corners of the world in a very short time. However, although the pace of change and access to technological advances are not evenly distributed geographically, there is increasing discussion about the rapid growth of interdependence and mutual influence among states, companies, and individuals worldwide – encompassing economic, political, social, and environmental ties. Nevertheless, the global economy – based on the free movement of goods and capital, accompanied by rapid technological change (the digital revolution) – does not guarantee stable development free from risks and disruptions.⁶ Contrary to expectations, new technologies have not reduced inequalities, solved climate problems, or ensured stable development. On the contrary, in the economic sphere, they have concentrated profits in the hands of powerful corporations that do not share added value with poorer societies, while simultaneously generating turbulence in various areas of human activity – for instance, in the labor market.⁷

The emergence of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus in China and the resulting disease, COVID-19 (Coronavirus Disease 2019), necessitated a redefinition of cognitive perspectives and political priorities worldwide. The COVID-19 pandemic was the first truly global event of the 21st century that forced most countries to clearly subordinate the ongoing functioning of their economies to the imperative of maintaining public health security – a process that led to increased structural burdens on the healthcare sector. A series of restrictions on economic activity were also introduced, a phenomenon described as a “freeze of the economy.”⁸ From the first months of 2020, the fight

6. International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook: Global Manufacturing Downturn, Rising Trade Barriers*, 2019, <https://www.imf.org/en/-/media/files/publications/weo/2019/october/english/text.pdf>, (access 26.10.2025).

7. Ibidem.

8. L. Laurent, *Europe Freezes Its Economy in Order to Fight the Coronavirus*, Bloomberg 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-03-16/europe-strangles-its-economy-in-order-to-fight-the-coronavirus>, (access 05.04.2020).

against the COVID-19 epidemic became the most critical economic, social, and political challenge for governments around the world. Managing the globally spreading epidemic and the subsequent economic crisis – which led, among other effects, to a severe deterioration of labor market conditions – required a paradigm shift in how the near future was envisioned.⁹ Moreover, the effects of the economic turbulence caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to extend beyond the official end of the epidemic. Therefore, policies supporting investment – essential for protecting the economy from stagnation – were and continue to be of great importance. The various restrictions on economic activity resulted not only in a decline in investment levels but also in decreases in real GDP and in the Dynamic Consumption Index. The downward trend in consumption observed among Poles during the pandemic was primarily a consequence of the broader macroeconomic situation. Labor market instability, rising inflation, and sharp increases in interest rates – which reduced disposable household income – have discouraged consumers from making additional purchases, particularly as the average consumer's purchasing power has weakened. Falling consumer demand posed new challenges for businesses, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, which now had to find ways to build or rebuild a strong market position and enhance their competitiveness.

The market economy system in developed countries is currently undergoing a structural crisis that operates on three levels: 1) a long-term decline in economic growth (the current one caused by the pandemic), 2) a more than 40-year-long process of increasing indebtedness in both the public and private sectors, and 3) a growing level of income and wealth inequality. This structural crisis brings new challenges that can be divided into four main categories:

1. Political challenges – how to distribute national income in a way that reflects the economic interests of various social and professional groups?
2. Economic challenges – what institutional mechanisms should be developed to balance the supply and demand for labor in the context of technological change?¹⁰
3. Social and demographic challenges – how can states ensure an income level sufficient to meet the health and social security needs associated with aging populations?
4. Challenges related to exclusion – how to prevent parts of society from being excluded from the ability to consciously and equally benefit from the achievements of democracy, despite widespread In-

9. F. Carbonero, E. Ernst, E. Weber, *Robots worldwide: The impact of automation on employment and trade*, International Labour Office 2018, Research Department Working Paper No. 36, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---inst/documents/publication/wcms_648063.pdf, (access 21.04.2020).

10. According to forecasts, by 2050 there will be over 1.5 billion people worldwide aged 65 and older. In 2020, global GDP fell by 4.3%, and GDP per capita decreased by 3.6%. See: J. Tomczyk, *Globalne PKB na rok 2021 i 2022 – nowe prognozy Banku Światowego*, ICAN Institute 2021, <https://www.ican.pl/b/globalne-pkb-na-rok-2021-i-2022--nowe-prognozy-banku-swiatowego/PICpmRYiR>, (access 27.07.2021).

ternet access and modern information channels, as technocratic approaches increasingly replace democratic governance?

The problems observed in the first two decades of the 21st century – and the resulting challenges for societies and states – were intensified by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent need to freeze the economy. This led to a sharp economic downturn that had already been emerging beforehand but was significantly deepened by the pandemic.

The global nature of the COVID-19 pandemic led most countries around the world to implement protective measures such as external border controls, school closures, restrictions on mass gatherings, quarantines, social distancing, and actions related to healthcare resources. The introduction of such protective measures – which strongly affect the course of social and economic processes – had immediate negative economic consequences at national, regional, and global levels. Based on the typology of sectoral vulnerability to the economic crisis caused by the pandemic, developed by International Labour Organization (ILO) analysts, it is estimated that the most crisis-prone sectors of the global economy – 1) accommodation and food services, 2) real estate; business and administrative activities, 3) manufacturing, 4) wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles, and 5) the aviation industry – could collectively be affected in ways impacting over 37% of the world's employed population (approximately 1.25 billion workers). In the case of the Polish economy, the impact of the crisis on economic output could affect more than 40% of employed individuals – an estimated 6.5 million workers.

According to a PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) survey conducted in April 2020, nearly 90% of companies in Poland experienced business disruptions resulting from social isolation and changes in consumer behavior.¹¹ Economically, the sectors most affected were those requiring direct interpersonal contact – that is, industries providing face-to-face services (e.g., restaurants, vacation resorts, and retail stores), as well as education, cultural and artistic institutions, and even the healthcare system. The crisis also impacted manufacturing and construction, which increasingly suffered from a shortage of skilled labor and had to contend with broken supply chains and resulting difficulties in obtaining raw materials and components. Economic indicators and business sentiment balances dropped to historic lows, with the depth and pace of these declines unseen in many years. The changes observed were atypical, differing from previously recorded cyclical and seasonal fluctuations, which only reinforced the sense of uncertainty – both among businesses and within society.

11. PwC, *Polski mikro, mały i średni biznes w obliczu pandemii COVID-19: Przychody, płynność i reakcja na wstrząs*, 2020, <https://www.pwc.pl/pl/pdf/polski-mikro-maly-sredni-biznes-w-obliczu-pandemii.pdf>, (access 01.10.2025).

The negative effects of restrictions on economic life also translated into the situation of households, generating concerns not only about employment but also about making future-oriented decisions. For example, consumers became more cautious about taking loans or purchasing luxury goods. In 2020, household consumption decreased by 3.4% compared to the previous year (compared with a 1.3% decline in overall consumption).¹² Declines were also recorded for other economic indicators in 2020. It was only in the following year (2021) that GDP rose in real terms by 6.9% compared to the previous year, and by 5.3% in 2022.¹³ However, the crisis triggered by the pandemic was most evident in the construction sector, where gross value added fell by 7.3% year-on-year in 2020. Yet the question remains: do the rising economic indicators in 2021 and 2022 justify the conclusion that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy is diminishing in subsequent years?

12. GUS, *Macroeconomic Data Bank [Bank Danych Makroekonomicznych]*, <https://bdm.stat.gov.pl/>, (access 18.11.2025).

13. Ibidem.

Pandemic and the Labor Market

The legal measures introduced to prevent and counteract the spread of the virus, as well as to combat the disease it caused, also had a significant impact on the labor market. The pandemic and lockdown disrupted existing labor market trends. Small and micro-enterprises (and some medium-sized ones) were particularly vulnerable, as they generally had limited financial reserves. To minimize short-term losses and maintain financial liquidity without resorting to layoffs, many companies decided to reduce employee wages. Despite these efforts, employment in enterprises saw its sharpest decline since November 2009, recorded in April 2020. Households and businesses faced the prospect of a rapid rise in unemployment in the following months, even despite a reduction in the supply of foreign workers.

In Poland, during the first quarter of 2020, 119.9 thousand jobs were eliminated, nearly 25% of which were lost due to the epidemic situation – almost exclusively in the private sector. As a result of these layoffs, by the end of the first quarter of 2020, the number of employed persons was 3.6% lower than at the end of the fourth quarter of 2019. This marked the end of a trend observed over several years of steady growth in national employment.¹⁴ At the same time, labor emigration declined, and the situation in the healthcare system worsened.

Job eliminations occurred across all enterprise size categories, but primarily affected units employing 50 people or fewer (over 80%), and – in terms of ownership structure – mainly private entities. The number of jobs eliminated due to the epidemic situation across specific sections of the Polish Classification of Activities (PKD) was generally proportional to the total number of jobs elimi-

14. GUS, *Wpływ epidemii COVID-19 na wybrane elementy rynku pracy w Polsce w pierwszym kwartale 2020 roku*, 2020, <https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/rynek-pracy/popyt-na-prace/wplyw-epidemii-covid-19-na-wybrane-elementy-ryнку-pracy-w-polsce-w-pierwszym-kwartale-2020-roku,4,1.html>, (access 26.10.2025).

nated (regardless of cause). For example, jobs eliminated in the Manufacturing sector accounted for about 15% of all eliminated jobs in the economy, while those lost in this sector specifically due to the epidemic represented about 12% of all pandemic-related job losses.¹⁵ The highest rates of job eliminations were also recorded in the following sectors: Accommodation and Food Services, Wholesale and Retail Trade, and Repair of Motor Vehicles, Including Motorcycles. According to studies conducted by the Central Statistical Office (GUS), the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected the employment situation of young people in particular. In the first quarter of 2020, compared to the same period in 2019, the number of employed individuals aged 15–34 decreased by 124,000. Year-over-year declines became more pronounced in subsequent quarters: in Q2 – 329,000 fewer young workers; in Q3 – 356,000 fewer; and in Q4 – 329,000 fewer. According to GUS, the social isolation restrictions – which involved closing or limiting the operations of specific industries – had a ripple effect on other sectors of the economy, forming a network of interconnected consequences. Government intervention through a series of special laws (the so-called “anti-crisis shields”) aimed, among other things, to implement solutions that would protect jobs (e.g., the option of using so-called “economic downtime”) and safeguard household incomes (e.g., additional childcare benefits for parents affected by the closure of schools and kindergartens). The job retention subsidies introduced under successive anti-crisis packages allowed employers to avoid layoffs. By mid-April 2020, employers had submitted applications totaling more than 2 billion PLN to support wage subsidies for 357,000 employees.¹⁶ In February 2020, the European Commission positively assessed the current situation of the Polish labor market.¹⁷ Entrepreneurs, meanwhile, also expected a fiscal policy response to the crisis triggered by the pandemic.

In addition to job eliminations, employers had to adapt to new forms of employment that allowed for social distancing – primarily remote work, which in many industries became a requirement and the only viable way to perform work duties. However, imprecise labor code provisions and the lack of clear regulations regarding costs associated with working from home often made its implementation difficult, even though remote work and greater flexibility in time management reduced not only the risk of infection but also unnecessary expenses. This shift helped alleviate mobility issues, reduce commuting costs, and decrease environmental pollution. On the other hand, it supported maintaining the professional activity of women before and after childbirth, as well as that of the youngest and oldest employees, and allowed for more flexible scheduling of working hours. Nonetheless, it required expanding Poland’s Internet infrastructure, extending the scope of e-administration, and, for employers, incurring costs related to purchasing equipment, software, and ensuring high net-

15. Ibidem.

16. D. Stelmaszczyk, *MRPiPS: employers have applied for over PLN 2 billion in support under the anti-crisis shield* [MRPiPS: pracodawcy zawnieśli o ponad 2 mld zł wsparcia w ramach tarczy antykryzysowej], Polska Agencja Prasowa 2020, <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C626150%2Cmrpips-pracodawcy-zawnioskowali-o-ponad-2-mld-zl-wsparcia-w-ramach-tarczy>, (access 14.04.2020).

17. European Commission, *Country Report – Poland*, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/2020-european-semester-country-reports_en, (access 02.04.2020).

work bandwidth. For most employees and employers, this was an entirely new situation – they had never previously encountered this form of work organization and performance. It represented a major organizational challenge, particularly for companies that had no prior experience with such practices before the pandemic. The labor market effectively crossed a threshold and entered a new era in which technology began to play a far greater role than before the epidemiological crisis. Companies that had already undertaken efforts toward digitization, automation, or robotics before the pandemic were in a much better position. The pandemic-induced lockdown also transformed attitudes toward work, forcing the development of new solutions that ensured business continuity and accelerating the implementation of modern technological processes. An important issue regarding remote work was the creation of tools to monitor and measure its effectiveness. According to EY research, 27% of surveyed employers noticed no difference in productivity between employees working in the office and those working remotely, 4% indicated lower productivity, and 2% reported higher productivity. Most respondents believed that effectiveness depended on the department or individual predispositions. Only about one-fourth of respondents based their assessments on actual performance metrics, monitoring KPIs and comparing them with pre-pandemic results.¹⁸

According to the results of the Central Statistical Office (GUS) survey “Demand for Labor” as of the end of March 2020, employees working remotely due to the epidemic accounted for 11% of all workers included in the study. This form of work was more commonly used in the public sector than in the private sector. Nearly one in six public sector employees worked remotely, compared to one in twelve in the private sector. Remote work was most frequently implemented in organizations employing between 10 and 49 people, where 13.6% of employees worked remotely, while in both smaller and larger entities the share was about 10%. Among all organizations that adopted remote work, the majority of remote workers were employed in the largest entities, suggesting that the biggest companies were best able to introduce this new form of work thanks to their greater organizational and financial capacity. The share of remote workers among all employed persons varied regionally. The shift to remote work in response to the epidemic was most commonly observed in the Warsaw metropolitan area (one in six workers), while it was least common in the Warmian-Masurian, Świętokrzyskie, and Podlaskie regions (one in fourteen workers).

In the years preceding the pandemic, a steady increase in employment was observed. According to the Central Statistical Office (GUS), the most significant changes in economic activity resulting from conditions related to the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic occurred in the second quarter

18. EY, *Organizacja pracy w czasie pandemii. Wyzwania dla HR w 2021 roku. Praca hybrydowa – mierzenie efektywności – nowa polityka wynagrodzeń i świadczeń pozapłacowych. Raport z badania rynku pracy*, Warsaw 2021.

of 2020. During that period, the number of employed persons (16,274 thousand) decreased by 210 thousand, or 1.3%, compared to the second quarter of 2019, and by 151 thousand compared to the first quarter of 2020. In the third quarter of 2020, when restrictions were eased with the hope of ending the pandemic, the number of employed persons slightly increased relative to the second quarter. At the same time, the percentage of people not working due to economic downtime, employee illness, or “other reasons” – including childcare – declined. In the fourth quarter of 2020, restrictions were re-introduced to curb the rise in COVID-19 infections (e.g., closure of shopping malls and limitations on restaurant and hotel operations). Despite these measures, the number of employed persons reached 16,555 thousand – an increase compared to both the previous quarter and the same period in 2019 (by 43 thousand, or 0.3%, and by 88 thousand, or 0.5%, respectively).

According to a report by the Central Statistical Office (GUS), the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the employment situation was already evident in the last two weeks of March 2020, when a significant increase was recorded in the percentage of employed persons who temporarily did not perform their work duties. One in five employed individuals did not work for at least a week, and 14% of those employed temporarily stopped working for reasons directly related to the epidemic, such as workplace closures or “other reasons,” which included childcare responsibilities. Although the “COVID-19 effect” was observed among both women and men, the nature of these changes differed somewhat. Women’s reduced economic activity was closely linked to fluctuations in restrictions on access to childcare institutions, as well as to the introduction of remote learning or the reopening of schools for in-person education. During the same period, there was a significant increase in the number of part-time workers and a sharp rise in the number of people performing their professional duties from home.

However, about 7.3% of employed persons who did not perform their work for at least one week in the fourth quarter amounted to 1,211 thousand individuals. One in four of them (323 thousand, or 26.7%) indicated a direct connection to the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of people working fewer hours than usual in their main job for reasons related to their workplace totaled 21 thousand in the fourth quarter of 2019, but a year later this figure had risen to 93 thousand – a change directly linked to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Employers had to face not only the large-scale introduction of a new form of work – one not thoroughly defined in the Labor Code – but also the need to purchase appropriate IT systems and

equipment that enabled this mode of performing professional duties. This was facilitated by the development of new technologies and the steadily increasing speed and accessibility of the Internet. Companies that had already implemented digitization, automation, or robotics before the pandemic were in a more favorable position than those that began adopting new technologies only in response to pandemic-related restrictions. Some employees – particularly parents and guardians of children under the age of eight – took advantage of childcare allowances provided under the Act of March 2, 2020, on special solutions for preventing, counteracting, and combating COVID-19, other infectious diseases, and the crisis situations caused by them, due to the closure of nurseries, kindergartens, schools, and other childcare institutions. According to data from the end of the first quarter of 2020, 2.3% of employed persons used this type of allowance (2.5% in the private sector and 1.9% in the public sector).

Over time, companies also introduced hybrid work, which involves performing professional duties in the office on some days (for example, when direct contact with clients is necessary) and from home or other locations on others. Among the professions whose representatives most frequently worked in a home office mode were programmers, graphic designers, architects, editors, journalists, translators, accountants, and telemarketers. After the pandemic, an increasing number of employers decided to permanently implement remote or hybrid work systems. According to estimates by the International Labour Organization (ILO), one in five employees in Poland now works in such a system.

However, small and micro-enterprises with limited financial reserves were not always able to afford the implementation of new technologies. To maintain financial liquidity without laying off employees, many of them reduced wages in order to minimize short-term losses. Despite these efforts, in April 2020 employment in enterprises experienced its largest decline since November 2009. There emerged a serious risk of a sharp rise in unemployment – and, consequently, a decrease in consumer demand – despite the reduced supply of foreign workers.

Protective Measures Un- dertaken by the State

As early as 2020, it was forecast that the implementation of anti-crisis measures related to the pandemic could lead to an increase in the budget deficit. The absence of bold revaluations in social and economic policy developed through social dialogue has resulted in growing fiscal pressure and the need to increase tax and social insurance burdens. This, in turn, has created difficulties in maintaining both public health and economic security. What should be the priorities of socio-economic policy to mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic?

- First, in the political sphere, Poland needs stability and stronger cooperation within the European Union, which offers concrete support programs for the economic and social policies of its member states.
- Second, public health must become an absolute priority of public policy. Increasing healthcare spending and investing in resources that strengthen health security should be the one area that justifies even higher public contributions.
- Third, social dialogue can serve as an instrument of political stabilization by involving large social groups – employers and employees – in the process of restoring order to public finances and reducing the budget deficit, even at the cost of modifying some social programs.
- Finally, fourth, dialogue must also be used to wisely address neglected areas of economic and social policy, including the reform of energy and climate policy, the pension system, and investments in public services such as healthcare, science, and education – sectors whose importance should grow and be regarded as forms of investment in the future.

The diagnosis and recommendations presented were the result of numerous analyses conducted by various academic and expert institutions. The mission of science to serve public affairs and society should emphasize both a sense of responsibility and the uncertainty that accompanies it. This uncertainty has stemmed not only from threats to health security but also from ongoing climate change and the still undefined goals of the emerging digital revolution. While the need to eliminate threats and reduce uncertainty is essential, the voice of the social sciences is equally important – to remind humanity that our planet remains, for now, the only space where human life, growth, and purpose can unfold. This calls for a new era of humanism, in which the central value is climate protection – achieved through all available means: democratic mechanisms, information technologies, medicine, and, ultimately, global solidarity aimed at reducing social and economic inequalities. The pandemic and its associated threats provided a powerful impulse for scholarly reflection on redefining our collective goals. But the question remains – has this actually happened?

Poland, like other countries in Europe and around the world, managed to cope with the pandemic crisis as an epidemiological threat largely thanks to the coordinated efforts of the scientific community, which succeeded in developing and making available safe vaccines for society. Science

passed the test – and, with greater or lesser difficulties, so did most states. A rather unexpected consequence of the pandemic and lockdowns, however, was the ensuing economic crisis caused by disruptions in supply chains – a challenge that economies are still struggling to overcome today. Another major concern remains the drastic increase in national debt, particularly domestic debt, which could lead to new crises in the future. In Poland, starting in 2020, as many pandemic-related expenditures were financed through the National Development Bank (Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego) and the Polish Development Fund (Polski Fundusz Rozwoju), off-budget debt began to rise sharply – from 3.3% of GDP in the first quarter of 2020 to 11.1% of GDP by the end of 2021.¹⁹ One of the elements of the Maastricht fiscal criteria is the debt of the general government sector (the so-called EDP debt), which provides the most comprehensive measure of Poland's total indebtedness. At the end of 2022, this debt amounted to 1.512 trillion PLN, representing an increase of 32.6 billion PLN in the fourth quarter of 2022 and an increase of 101.7 billion PLN compared to the end of 2021. The ratio of EDP debt to GDP at the end of the fourth quarter of 2022 was 49.3%, which represents a decrease of 1 percentage point compared to the previous quarter and a drop of 4.5 percentage points compared to the end of 2021.²⁰ In turn, in 2024, according to data from the Central Statistical Office (GUS), the debt of the general government sector amounted to 2.0126 trillion PLN, representing 55.1% of GDP.²¹

The Importance of Education

The social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to its impact on the economy and labor market, also profoundly affected the sphere of education – both in the short and long term. The repeated, mandatory closures of schools and the shift to remote learning required a complete reorganization of the educational process, the adoption of distance-learning tools, and the management of numerous related challenges. The pandemic situation thus became a test for the Polish education system and educational policy, revealing their key problems and structural weaknesses.²² The institutional unpreparedness for such a crisis heightened uncertainty and made it difficult for all participants in the educational system – from administrators to teachers, students, and their families – to cope with the new realities. Findings from studies²³ conducted during the pandemic indicate that broader, systemic problems were intertwined with more specific, often technical and organizational issues directly related to the pandemic. Among the former were the structure and overload of the national curriculum, insufficient digital competencies among teachers, teaching methods focused primarily on knowledge transmission, inadequate infrastructure in educational institutions (equipment, software, Internet access), and a perceived lack of systemic support among school administrators and teachers. In addition, there were challenges directly stemming from the pandemic situation it-

19. Public debt counter [Licznik długu publicznego], <https://dlugubliczny.org.pl/>, (access 21.04.2020).

20. PLN 100 billion per year. The latest data on Poland's debt [100 mld zł w rok. Są najnowsze dane o zadłużeniu Polski], Business Insider 2023, <https://businessinsider.com.pl/gospodarka/zadluzenie-polski-w-rok-wzroslo-o-100-mld-zl-sa-najnowsze-dane/q6m-4hdw>, (access 01.10.2025).

21. GUS, Komunikat dotyczący deficytu i długu sektora instytucji rządowych i samorządowych w 2024 r., 2025, https://stat.gov.pl/download/gfx/portalinformacyjny/pl/defaultaktualnosci/5483/1/41/1/komunikat_dotyczacy_deficytu_i_dlugu_sektora_instytucji_rzadowych_i_samorzadowych_w_2024_r.pdf, (access 26.10.2025).

22. Najwyższa Izba Kontroli, Funkcjonowanie szkół w sytuacji zagrożenia COVID-19, 2021, <https://www.nik.gov.pl/plik/id,25380,vp,28141.pdf>, (access 01.10.2025).

23. The conclusions presented below are based on reports from a survey of teachers: Remote education during the pandemic. Research report [Edukacja zdalna w czasie pandemii. Raport z badań], Digital Center [Centrum Cyfrowe] 2020, https://centrumcyfrowe.pl/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2020/05/Edukacja_zdalna_w_czasie_pandemii.pptx-2.pdf, (access 01.10.2025); A. Buchner,

self – including the lack of experience in conducting remote classes, inadequate space and equipment for work or study at home, the need to balance work with caregiving responsibilities, limited peer interaction among students, the disappearance of students and teachers from the school system (loss of contact or withdrawal from online education), the particularly difficult situation of students with special educational needs, disabilities, or those from disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as physical exhaustion, health problems, and mental health issues.

Both in the labor market and in the education system, the experience of the pandemic constitutes a crucial source of knowledge, inspiration, and policy recommendations for the future. At the same time, the pandemic and post-pandemic periods coincide with a major technological breakthrough – the rapid development and widespread use of generative artificial intelligence tools – whose impact on both areas is difficult to overestimate. In this context, the educational model transformation triggered by the pandemic, even if incomplete or imperfect, represents an important step that may facilitate the transition to the next, inevitable stage of the digital revolution in education. Analyzing how the educational system functioned during the pandemic allows for the formulation of broader recommendations relevant to future challenges – including potential new social crises (such as the consequences of the war in Ukraine) and deeper socio-economic transformations affecting both education and labor markets. In seeking possible solutions, it is worth referring to the framework proposed by the OECD in its 2020 report *Lessons for Education from COVID-19*, which emphasized two key concepts: resilience, defined as the capacity of educational systems to withstand potential crises, and responsiveness, meaning their ability to adapt to changing needs and expectations of participants.²⁴ While the authors acknowledge the difficulty of translating these principles into specific actions, they point to several universal priorities. According to their guidelines, education policy and system design should focus primarily on the participants and the learning process itself, rather than the mode of delivery (traditional, remote, or hybrid). Continuous professional development of administrators and teachers, institutional support, and the strengthening of both individual resilience and system responsiveness are therefore crucial. To implement these objectives, greater flexibility, personalization, and adaptability of educational systems to diagnosed needs and circumstances are essential.²⁵

The operationalization of these principles and their integration into the functioning of the education system can be regarded as one of the greatest challenges facing Polish educational policy – particularly in light of its close interconnection with the evolving labor market and the dynamics of a digital society.

M. Wierzbicka, *Edukacja zdalna w czasie pandemii. Edycja II*, Centrum Cyfrowe 2020, https://centrumcyfrowe.pl/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2020/11/Raport_Edukacja-zdalna-w-czasie-pandemii-Edycja-II.pdf, (access 01.10.2025).

24. OECD, *Lessons for Education from COVID-19: A Policy Maker's Handbook for More Resilient Systems*, OECD Publishing 2020, p. 11, DOI: 10.1787/0a530888-en, (access 01.10.2025).

25. Ibidem, p. 12.

Conclusion

Poland's recovery from the economic stagnation caused by the pandemic largely depends on whether private enterprises – regardless of their sector – resume investment activity. The economy requires capital for business development and long-term investments, particularly in digitalization, automation, and robotics. Conducting an innovation-oriented policy that supports business investment is a necessary condition for restoring full employment and economic growth. Such efforts should be accompanied by radical changes in economic policy, especially the introduction of measures that promote entrepreneurship – including reforms in taxation and social contributions, and the reduction of excessive legal regulation, which can have a destructive impact on business development. Employers often fear successive legal changes, as they not only entail additional costs but also require adjustments to procedures, IT systems, and documentation. Implementing them demands both substantial labor input and financial investment. Therefore, a proactive investment support policy is essential, along with assistance for workers in acquiring new skills and qualifications. From the perspective of the future labor market, the most critical factors are technological: the level of business digitalization, the extent of work automation, the degree of labor market virtualization, and the advancement of robotics in services. The remote – and increasingly hybrid – work model, tested during the pandemic, has now become a structural feature of many enterprises. Work organization models are being tailored to the specific nature of particular positions, while legal frameworks have been adjusted accordingly. During the pandemic and post-pandemic periods, businesses developed solutions optimized to their operational needs.

Referring to the objective outlined at the beginning of this article, it should be emphasized that the key conclusion emerging from the conducted analysis is the necessity of developing public policies that can rapidly adapt to crisis conditions, respond flexibly, and remain sensitive to the needs of individual actors within the socio-economic system – including enterprises, employers, employees, and institutions in both the public and civic sectors. At the same time, an essential component of such policymaking is the ability to operate under conditions of uncertainty and instability, where previously tested – even the most effective – solutions may prove inadequate in the face of new and evolving challenges.

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