

# Warsaw's Multiculturalism

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Throughout the centuries, Poland's capital, Warsaw, known for its dynamic and sometimes dramatic history, has been a city of many nations and cultures. Ever since the Middle Ages, due to its geopolitical location, Warsaw was considered the Central-Eastern European melting pot. The contemporary character and a specific nature of today's Warsaw stems from several factors, the most significant of which is the fact the city was almost completely destroyed during World War II. In 1938, the population of the Polish capital stood at 1,295,000. In January 1945, only 162,000 people lived in Warsaw, although the number quickly grew in the following months (GUS 2018). According to a census of Warsaw held on 15 May 1945, the population increased to 378,000 inhabitants (Czerwińska-Jędrusiak 2009, pp. 7–8). Undeniably, the city suffered from discontinuity, which has had tremendous social and cultural consequences. These events still resonate in the lives of contemporary Warsaw's citizens, in the 21st century. The city is far more diverse in terms of ethnical, religious, and cultural influences than the rest of the country, which is quite homogenous.

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## 1. Jews in Warsaw

Inter-war Poland (1918–1939) was the world's second biggest centre of Jewish life, with a vital and diverse Jewish Community, constituting 10% of the country's total population. In 1918, Jews constituted 42.2% of the total population of Warsaw. After World War II, the Jewish community in the country shrank significantly. As noted by Lucjan Dobroszycki, altogether, about 250,000 Jews stayed in Poland for varying periods. Warsaw has remained the most important centre of Jewish life in the country. Nearly 13% of Polish Jews sought residence in the capital (in July 1945, there were 50,000 Jews in Warsaw), a higher proportion than the approximately 11% who had lived there before the war ([Engel 2015, pp. 564–65](#)). However, this number has been drastically reduced as a result of waves of emigration. There were four mass waves: 1945–46, 1949–50, 1956–57, and 1968–69 ([Dobroszycki 1973](#)), each with its specific causes and course, and each accompanied by anti-Semitism and hostility from the post-war communist regime. As soon as 1949, the activity of Jewish organisations was being limited, as Zionist parties were banned. Other Jewish organisations were subjected to the strict control of state apparatus. From the beginning of the 1950s, state institutions, gradually, through propaganda campaigns, created a negative image of Israel and anti-Semitism has been recognised by the communist leaders as a tool for political conflict—a fact which has had tragic consequences for Jewish life in Poland, particularly in Warsaw.

The 1990s was primarily a time of a great political, economic, but also socio-cultural transition, with a rebirth of Jewish life among one of many significant changes. As soon as 1993, the Union of Jewish Religious Communities in Poland was officially established and recognised by state authorities as a continuation of the Religious Union of the Mosaic Faith, established in 1946 (a legal successor of pre-war Jewish communities). However, as one of our interviewees admitted, in cultural and social terms, an important feature of the “contemporary Jewish community in Poland is its ‘discontinuity’” (Warsaw's interview partner number 3). This, in turn, is very much related to the most dramatic chapter of the history of Polish Jews: the Holocaust.

According to the last National Census of Population held in 2011, 7353 Polish citizens declared themselves as belonging to the Jewish minority. Out of that number, 2690 people lived in the Mazowieckie voivodeship (GOV.pl 2021) within its capital, Warsaw. As for Warsaw itself, a more precise estimation can be made by looking into the number of members of Jewish organisations active in Warsaw. The largest one of these is the Warsaw orthodox Jewish congregation with ca. 700 members. It is also the largest community in Poland ([GUS 2019](#)). However, Warsaw is a seat for other religious communities working under the roof of congregations (such as the progressive Etz Chaim community) or independently (e.g., the liberal Bait Warszawa established in 2009 and the Chabad Lubavitch community, which started its operations in Warsaw in 2005). There is also an important cultural, but not necessarily religious, centre of Jewish life: the Jewish Community Centre.

Therefore, it can be said that Jewish life in Warsaw is characterised by religious and cultural diversity—this is actually not unique, as it follows a typical trend for Jewish lives in other European metropolises. The divisions reflect the different approaches to religiosity but can also be seen as a form of development that often stems from disagreements on certain issues. Such was the case of Bait Warszawa, which split into Beit Śródmieście and Beit Konstancin (Warsaw's interview partner number 1). However, the Jewish life in Warsaw maintains its coherence: different groups coexist and interpenetrate each other. A good example, here, is the Jewish Lauder School (a primary and high school), attended by children from families with different religious backgrounds, both liberal and orthodox, as well as non-Jewish, Polish pupils (Warsaw's interview partner number 1).

On the one hand, the diversity within the Jewish community's life is seen as a manifestation of development. On the other hand, it is also linked to the issue of leadership. It seems, however, that there is some kind of generation gap in terms of leadership. The readiness of the younger generation to be more deeply involved in the development of community life remains an open question. Another variable, mentioned by our interlocutors, which can influence the scenarios for the future, is a gradual withdrawal of financial support from international Jewish organisations, such as the R. Lauder Foundation. It has been argued the Polish Jewish community “has grown up” already and, as a result of the reprivatisation of Jewish communal property, it has managed to accumulate the capital needed for further organisational development (Warsaw's interview partner number 2). As noted by a Jewish community activist and educator, “now is such an interesting moment that international Jewish organisations are withdrawing from Poland, withdrawing their financial support for us. And now we must learn to live without the subsidy flow that has been the driving force of development over the past 30 years. On the one hand, it's difficult, but on the other hand maybe it's time to live on our own account” (Warsaw's interview partner number 1).

## **2. Muslims in Warsaw**

The Muslim community in Poland constitutes only 0.7 percent of the entire population. Yet, still, it is very difficult to precisely indicate how many Muslims live in Poland's capital, Warsaw. According to various estimates and sources, up to 40,000 Muslims live in Poland and nearly one third of them are Warsaw inhabitants (for more details see: [GUS 2019, pp. 251–62](#)). Although the Muslim community in Poland can be considered as small, it is quite diverse. The autochthonic Polish Muslims, the Tatars, who have lived in Poland for 600 hundred years, are settled mostly in the Białystok region. The first significant non-Tatar groups of Muslims arrived in Poland in the 1970s—these were mostly Arab students. Finally, it can be said that there is a third group, mostly refugees and asylum-seekers, which started to arrive in Poland over the past two decades. At first, they were Muslims from the Caucasus region (mostly Chechens) and, later, refugees from the Middle East. More recently, the city has been a destination for economic migrants (from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan, and, to a lesser extent, Turkey). It can be said that the Muslim community in Warsaw is a community of migrants. For many of them, Poland has not been the dream destination, as they intended to transit to other Western European countries, for instance Germany.

While Tatars gathered in the Muslim Religious Union are an almost non-existent community in Warsaw, the Muslim League<sup>38</sup> that runs the Muslim Cultural Centre in Warsaw holds a dominant position. Their mosque, located in Warsaw's so-called Blue City, opened in 2015, is the largest progressively developing centre of Muslim community life.

Probably, the greatest challenge and disadvantage for Muslims living in Poland is a growing level of prejudice based on negative stereotypes. According to Adam Bodnar, Polish Ombudsman, Muslims suffer from acts of aggression, hate speech, and various kinds of discrimination. All this can be observed as the specific aftermath of the migration crisis, with its peak in 2015, and the following mainstream public narrative ([Bertram et al. 2017](#)). Moreover, in the most recent public opinion polls, Muslims are mostly negatively perceived by Poles ([CBOS 2019](#)). A vast majority of respondents claimed that Muslims living in Europe are unwilling to assimilate and adopt the customs and values of the majority (66%), are intolerant (63%), and, finally, generally accept the use of violence against followers of other religions (50%). Interestingly enough, the image of Islam and Muslims in Poland is primarily based on media reports, and not respondents' own experiences ([Bertram et al. 2017](#)). When describing their struggle with Islamophobia, Polish Muslims referred to “how Jews were treated a hundred years ago”, underlining that “now this is how Muslims are treated” ([RPO 2016](#)). As noted by one of the interviewed experts, saying “almost everything about Muslims”—including Islamophobic statements and opinions that “could never be said publicly about Jews”—is widely acceptable in the Polish society (Warsaw's interview partner number 7).

### 3. Warsaw's Multicultural Global Neighbourhood

While Warsaw naturally shares some characteristics with other metropolises, it definitely has its own character that very much results from the city's contemporary history. One aspect that drives social interactions is the fact that 49% of contemporary Warsaw's citizens were not born in the city ([Wagner et al. 2016, p. 276](#)). Therefore, a traditional social trajectory, resulting from the fact that people would have friends from their childhood or school period, very often is not the case in Warsaw. People live in bubbles, often working a lot and not interacting with others as frequently as if they were in their hometowns. Thus, for those who have settled in Warsaw at some point of their life, there is less of a "social fabric", without which it is more difficult to be connected and attached to the urban social substance.

Moreover, as concluded by one of the interviewees, "the city is huge, spilled and badly designed in terms of communication (...) and all this is not conducive to meetings, which are a precondition for maintaining and strengthening real relationships and social ties" (Warsaw's interview partner number 7). Of course, one should not forget about the devastating consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, in this regard. This reflection has been elaborated further by another interview partner, who admitted that "in Warsaw, too much is going on, and because of that, a lot of things would not have a proper rank and importance, and many of initiatives would just 'fly away' without grabbing wider attention" (Warsaw's interview partner number 6).

In addition to that, our interlocutors perceived the Warsaw municipal authorities as rather passive or, sometimes, reactive when it concerned to their relations with minorities. Recently, the municipality has become almost invisible when it comes to initiatives promoting intercultural dialogue. Perhaps this is because Warsaw, as a capital city with its metropolitan dynamics, is influenced by global themes and trends, rather than being focused on locality and its trajectories.

### 4. Jews and Muslims in Warsaw—From Interactions to Relationship

As observed by one of the interviewed experts, "interactions and relationship between Muslims and Jews in Warsaw are rather irregular, unsystematic and non-institutionalized" and they cannot be seen as well-established relationships.<sup>39</sup>

The above-mentioned interactions, happening on a personal level, refer to the community leaders rather than to regular individuals (Warsaw's interview partner number 8). As highlighted by one of the interlocutors, "people living within majority society would not show their religious affiliation", especially in a city like Warsaw, which is highly secularised when compared to the rest of the country (Warsaw's interview partner number 9).

Nevertheless, initiatives bringing together community leaders under joint actions, while still incidental, have a ground-breaking potential. One such undertaking is the visit from over 60 prominent Islamic scholars from 28 countries who, in 2020, on the initiative of the American Jewish Community, came to Poland. The Jewish–Islamic delegation first jointly visited the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial Site on 23 January, to later spend a day in Warsaw, where they were hosted by the local Jewish community celebrating an interfaith Sabbath dinner ([AJC 2020](#)).

It is worth noting that this unique event, although very limited in time and space, had a significant continuation. A year later, on 22 February 2021, The Community of Conscience—A Coalition of Mutual Respect was established. The Community is a group of twelve people<sup>40</sup> coming from various religious communities and organisations (Muslim, Jews, and Christians). The people who created it represent only themselves, not the religious communities they belong to, but because each of them plays an important role in a given community, the initiative is of great importance. Its declared mission<sup>41</sup> is to be a voice of solidarity expressing unity out of its concern for fundamental human and civil rights. As noted by the initiator and coordinator of the initiative, "it took some time to convince community leaders not only to meet somewhere but, more importantly, to speak out with one voice". He explained that "each of these communities struggles with so many different internal challenges and difficulties that engaging in something 'external' may remain at the end of the priority list. So, somehow there is a thinking, let's first organise ourselves and clean up what needs to be cleaned up within our community, and only then let's think of doing something 'outside' or in partnership with 'others' (Warsaw's interview partner number 2)". Nonetheless, the Muslim clergy's visit to Poland was a clear success and has contributed to building an atmosphere conducive to creating a genuine sense of community. The interest in the Muslim–Jewish dialogue has increased and it has been noticed that there is some space for development and a social demand for this kind of relationships. The resulting message has the potential to overcome differences and divisions.

At the same time, there is no doubt that the so-called regular community members are well aware of the existence of "other" minority groups. Moreover, Jews and Muslims in Warsaw constitute an important reference point for each other, at least discursively. Sometimes, they would symbolically support each other. In 2010, the municipal authorities of Warsaw decided to hand over a land plot in one of the districts, Ochota, to the Muslim League for the purpose of building a

mosque. The move sparked protests, which the association of Polish Jews, B'nai B'rith Polin, found incomprehensible. Moreover, a group of Warsaw's Jewish activists issued an open letter published via electronic media supporting the Muslim community ([Wyborcza.pl 2010](#)). Sometimes, the two communities would exchange invitations to participate in public educational events. A good example of this is a debate organised by the Danube Institute for Dialogue<sup>42</sup>. The event entitled "Dialogue in Abrahamic Religions: Our Shared Responsibility", which took place on June 2021, saw ideas, such as brotherhood, respect, and tolerance, discussed by a member of Warsaw's Jewish Community—Konstanty Gebert, a catholic priest, Grzegorz Michalczyk, and Professor Aldona Piwko, Islamic studies expert from the Vistula (Warsaw's interview partner number 6).

On more than one occasion, Muslims with a refugee background had experiences of receiving support or help from Polish NGOs, mostly those visible and active in Warsaw. Our empirical study revealed that this exact context has turned into an opportunity for Jewish–Muslim interactions. One of our Muslim respondents—a female refugee from Chechnia—said that the first Jewish person she had ever met was a woman who volunteered to work with refugees in a closed detention centre, in Kętrzyn. While recollecting painful memories from that extremely difficult period of her family life, she underlined the great help she received from the volunteers, in terms of preparing necessary documentation, but also financial support and, most importantly, friendship (Warsaw's interview partner number 5).

This theme, as if as a mirror image, appears in another conversation held for the purpose of this study. A younger generation Jewish respondent, while speaking about family history and heritage, admitted: "I grew up in a family that has been socially involved for generations (...) my mother for almost 20 years ran an office for refugees in the Polish Humanitarian Action. She died 10 years ago, but when she was alive, she was probably the most important person when it comes to helping refugees in Poland, helping in a legal, material and emotional sense (...) Today her work is continued by my older sister" (Warsaw's interview partner number 5).

In conclusion, it can be said that the coexistence of the two religious minorities in Warsaw occurs on two, seemingly separate, planes. The first one sees community leaders interacting with each other, but doing so on their own behalf, rather than as representatives of their respective communities. As the interactions follow a degree of structure and intended form, they result in certain measurable outcomes (for example, declarations and meetings). The second plane is much less structured—one could even characterise it as an anarchic space for spontaneous meetings. While Jewish–Muslim interactions take place on these two main planes, they sometimes overlap and influence each other, or even create a specific kind of synergy. Such was the case in September 2021, when the Community of Conscience issued a statement on the urgent need for action to support refugees staying on the Polish–Belarusian border: "Motivated by a sense of human solidarity, we call on the competent Polish authorities to immediately provide the refugees staying in the border area with the necessary humanitarian aid (...)" ([Więź 2021](#)). It is worth noting that the general conclusion that can be drawn from all the interviews is that the experience of belonging to a minority community makes people particularly sensitive and empathetic towards others, especially those who are somehow disadvantaged.

Finally, a common conclusion that can be drawn from the empirical study is that the Jews and Muslims living their lives in Poland's capital are rather careful, or even reluctant, to formulate sharp political opinions. This applies to both international affairs—including the Palestinian–Israeli conflict—and domestic, highly politicised disputes. This specific kind of caution can be explained as the fear of being instrumentalised, but also as a form of ambivalent feelings towards controversial issues, such as the Middle Eastern conflict. Such complex sentiments can be illustrated by a testimony of one Jewish interlocutor: "for some, this issue is black and white, for me it is not so simple. On the one hand, I would like the policy towards Palestine to be different. On the other hand, this conflict becomes unsolvable after so many years and it is not only Israel's fault" (Warsaw's interview partner number 2). Meanwhile, one of the interviewed Muslim community leaders emphasised: "we don't want to be part of politics and political games, we can cooperate with everyone but don't want to be on anybody's side, our role is work for the community" (Warsaw's interview partner number 4).

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