

The Consulate General of the Republic of Poland in Sydney – the Activities, Tasks and Responsibilities

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Abstract

The Consulate General of the Republic of Poland in Sydney is one of the thirty-seven consulates that function in Australia. The scope of duties and work of the consulate is set up by the rules and directives of the Polish Foreign Policy Strategy for 2017–2021 and is determined by the Consular Law and other regulations.

Keywords: Polish-Australian relations, Consulate General of the Republic of Poland, Sydney

Introduction

The Polish Embassy in Canberra and The Consulate General of the Republic of Poland in Sydney are two diplomatic missions that perform their political and consular duties in Australia. Additionally, there are five Honorary Consulates that

support the Embassy and Consulate's work. The Honorary Consul in Perth, Mr Paweł Bitdorfis, is the first and only Polish Honorary Consul worldwide who is able to prepare and certify extracts, excerpts and copies of documents, thanks to the decision of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2020).

The Consulate General of the Republic of Poland in Sydney was established in 1941 and had operated until July 1945. The first Consul General of the Republic of Poland was Mr Sylwester Gruszka, Polish soldier, diplomat and consular officer. In July 1945 The United Kingdom and The United States abandoned their Polish ally, withdrawing recognition from the London-based Polish government in exile. On March 16, 1948, the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs issued the act establishing the Consulate General of the Republic of Poland in Sydney. However, at that time, the office did not open. On February 1, 1957, the Consulate General was re-established in Sydney with a consular district covering the entire territory of the Commonwealth of Australia. The office was officially opened in March 1957.

The Consulate General of the Republic of Poland is located in Sydney with jurisdiction in: Australia (the Commonwealth of Australia), excluding the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and seven additional Accredited Pacific countries: Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Solomon Islands, Marshall Islands, Vanuatu, Nauru and Micronesia. The area of the consular jurisdiction covers over 7 687 million km². The consulate operates daily, except weekends and national holidays, both Polish and Australian. There is a special emergency telephone number active 24/7. All information, including contact details, can be found on the official webpage *Poland in Australia* – www.gov.pl/australia. The consulate is active on social media, like Twitter and, quite recently, Facebook.

The basic tasks

The legal basis for the operational functions of the Polish Consulate is legislated in the Consular Law Act ('the Act') (*Ustawa z dnia 25 czerwca 2015 r. Prawo konsularne, Dz.U. 2015, poz. 1274*). The Act specifies procedures for appointing consuls of the Republic of Poland, consular duties, the proceedings required in the presence of a consul, rules for collecting consular fees and procedures for appointing honorary consuls of the Republic of Poland and their duties. The main responsibilities of a consul are to protect the interests of the Republic of Poland and its citizens abroad, strengthen ties between the Republic of Poland and its citizens and persons of Polish origin residing in the host country, as well as to support the development of economic, scientific, technological and cultural cooperation between Poland and the host country.

The nature of the consular work in Australia is determined by and depends on the size and activity of the resident Polish community. In the 2016 Census

Report there were 183 974 entries regarding Polish ancestry. Due to the high number of people who have declared their Polish background, the activity of the consulate office is definitely dominated by issues related to the Polish diaspora. Thus, the consular tasks include: passport applications, organisational process and conduct of passport duty visits in other capital cities (Melbourne, Perth, Brisbane, Adelaide, Hobart, Darwin) as well as in other places of the consular district, setting up meetings and events that promote Polish history, culture and language. The Australian Polish community has a tremendous cultural potential: there are a great number of recognised well-known artists among them and many young emerging talents. The consulate cooperates with them by organising concerts, film screenings, and meetings with authors. Furthermore, the Polish Government offers financial support to Polish organisations' projects to cultivate Polish heritage and create strong community relations. It is worth mentioning that the consulate in Sydney in 2020 coordinated and dealt with 50 such projects that were beneficial for the Polish community in Australia.

It should be emphasised that there are more and more people interested in having Polish passports. Thus, in recent years consuls have noticed a growing number of requests to initiate confirmation of Polish citizenship procedures through descent. The applicant needs to fill out an application form for the Regional Voivodeship Office (*województwo*) and present all relevant documentation proving his/her Polish heritage.

The consulate provides support across a wide range of legal matters, including the implementation of the Polish justice and administration authorities' requests for the delivery of official documents and conducting hearings for Polish citizens with pending cases in Polish Courts. Furthermore, the Consulate General together with the Polish Embassy deal with extradition matters. For requests of extradition cases from the Australian authorities, the consul provides logistical support to Polish officials. The consulate also deals with a large number of cases related to the transcription of foreign civil status documents at the Polish Registry Offices (*USC*). The consulates can also provide services of the Registry Offices, as consuls have the legal competencies to marry two Polish citizens abroad. The Consul General, since her arrival in 2019, has married three couples.

It is important to emphasise that a consul protects the rights and interests of the Republic of Poland and its citizens within existing international law regulations. Australia and other countries of the consular district respect the international regulations, and the consul has not been notified of any discrimination cases purely due to the Polish origin of a person.

The consul also provides consular assistance to Polish citizens in serious accidents or sickness, arrests or detention cases, acts of physical or mental abuse. The support is also provided to families of Polish citizens overseas in the event of death. If a Polish citizen finds himself/herself in a dire financial situation, he or she can request

financial assistance from the consulate. The consul will facilitate contact with relatives or friends who should send the money through a bank or a company that provides such services. In particularly justified cases, the consul may provide the refundable financial assistance necessary for a person to return home. With some cases “a one off” financial allowance can be granted as well. In cases requiring a consul’s intervention concerning Polish citizens located further away from the Sydney office, the consul asks for the support of local honorary consuls.

The Consulate General of the Republic of Poland in Sydney also deals with foreigners and their requests for assistance in many legal and personal matters. The main task is to provide information regarding Schengen and the Polish visa application process. The airport transit Schengen visa (A-Type), Schengen visa (C-Type), National visa (D-Type) are the types of visa issued by the consul.

The Consul General of the Republic of Poland in Sydney works towards developing friendly relations and cooperation between Poland and the countries of the consular district. The consul is a member of the Consular Corps and liaises with other consuls and governmental authorities, mainly the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, to cooperatively solve problems, exchange information as well as attending meetings, events and conferences. The consul is also responsible for developing and maintaining good and respectable relationships with the local authorities.

It is worth mentioning that in 2020 Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley AC QC, The Governor of New South Wales visited for the first time the Consulate General of the Republic of Poland in Sydney. Together with representatives of local authorities and Polish organisations the Governor attended the decoration ceremony of Australian citizens who had been awarded by the President of the Republic of Poland, PhD, Andrzej Duda, in recognition of their services to Poland and the Polish diaspora. Furthermore, last year the *Parliamentary Friends of Poland* group was established at the New South Wales Parliament.

One of the tasks of the Consul General of The Republic of Poland in Sydney is to develop and deepen economic and scientific cooperation, as well as to promote the Polish economy and science. The Polish Investment and Trade Agency in Sydney and other organisations, supporting Polish business, are the active partners for the consul to build the economic Polish – Australian network with mutual meetings, information exchange and bilateral assistance during study visits and workshops. For example, in 2020 during the Sydney business event, the Consul General with the director of PAIH (Mr Jakub Wilhelm) were promoting Poland as a country of choice for its reliable market and safe business investment environment.

The time of crisis

The year 2020 was an unprecedented year not only for Australia: large fires, which burned nearly 12.65 million hectares, with approximately 2.9 million Australians directly affected by them, followed by record-breaking floods and then the outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic worldwide have influenced the work of the consulate with taking on additional, specific duties.

During the time of bush fires and floods, one of the primary tasks for the consulate was to inform Polish citizens in Australia about the existing danger. The important element for people travelling to Australia is to register their trip on the Polish Ministry Foreign Affairs portal *Odyseusz*¹ [*Odysseus*]. Once the person is registered there, the consul can send notifications via mail or short messages.

In times of crisis, the consul has systematically sent materials to tourists and residents that are logged in on the Polish portal. Furthermore, the reports and current data have been sent to the Ministry, and then, accordingly, special instructions have been posted on the official webpage and on various social media.² Thanks to the consular reports, information for travellers about the changing situation in Australia³ has been regularly updated.

During the pandemic, the consulate has experienced a significant increase in the number of enquiries regarding the current legal and factual situation related to travel to Poland and Australia. It is important to point out that the possibility of leaving Australia has also been limited, as the Australian Government introduced in March 2020 a ban for international travel for Australian citizens and permanent residents, as well as those with dual citizenship.

Additionally, due to the worldwide pandemic, the Australian borders have been closed to incoming foreigners. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade data sent out to the diplomatic missions shows that at the beginning of 2020 about 4,000 Poles were staying in Australia on various types of visas. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, more than half of them decided to leave Australia. In January 2021, there were approximately 2,700 of our compatriots still in Australia. Besides the crisis reports and personal inquiries, the consulate has helped Polish citizens to return to their home country. In March and April 2020 the consuls were responsible for the logistics of the successful *Flight Home* initiative of the Polish Government and the Polish Airlines LOT.

The pandemic situation has also influenced the way that the consulate operates and provides consular services. Personal contacts have transformed into online consultations. The consul has been taking part in various Zoom conferences with

¹ More information: <https://odyseusz.msz.gov.pl/>

² The information for Poles because of the COVID-19 pandemic: <https://www.gov.pl/web/australia/informacja-w-zwiazku-z-rozprzestrzenianiem-sie-koronawirusa>

³ More information: <https://www.gov.pl/web/dyplomacja/australia>

other consuls, Australian authorities, representatives of Polish organisations and schools. Additionally, the Consul General of the Republic of Poland personally has prepared special letters and video recordings for several occasions, e.g. a story for children for International Children's Day, messages for Polish citizens for the National Day and for Christmas.

Since September 2019, the Consul General of the Republic of Poland with the team has tried to renovate and improve the consulate's premises and surroundings to make it more friendly for clients and visitors. The Polish Consulate in Sydney is the face of Poland. The entrance and waiting room have been updated. There are pictures of Polish cities on the walls and the TV screen shows films about Polish history, culture and tourism. There are plans for further renovations in the near future.

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Monika Kończyk – PhD, Consul General of the Republic of Poland in Sydney. She holds a PhD in law. She defended her doctoral thesis in 2017 at the University of Gdańsk. She has a Master's degree in both English philology and biology. She has also completed other postgraduate studies in management and mediation. Outside these immediate fields of expertise, she participated in the Argo Top Executive Project run by the National School of Public Administration (Warsaw) and IESE (Barcelona).

Dr Kończyk was the Pomeranian Chief Education Officer between 13 April 2016 and 26 August 2019. Prior to taking up the position of Consul General in Sydney, she had been an international representative of the National Section of Education of NSZZ Solidarność (Independent and Self-governing Trade Union Solidarność). Between 2006 and 2016, she was a member of the European Trade Union Committee

for Education (ETUCE). As part of her broader outreach and engagement, she represented Polish teachers' unions in the European Sectoral Social Dialogue Committee at the European Commission. She also served as a member of the European Commission Advisory Committee on Vocational Training (ACVT).

Mrs Kończyk worked as a research assistant at the University of Gdańsk, and then as an English and biology teacher in secondary schools in Poland. In 2012, she participated in the scholarship program run by the Japan International Labour Foundation (JILAF). She currently holds the position of a fellow of the German Marshall Foundation. For exceptional services in education, she was honoured with the Medal of the Commission of National Education.

In 2018, the President of the Republic of Poland awarded Dr Kończyk with the Silver Cross of Merits for her outstanding contributions in the educational space as well as for her targeted social and community initiatives.