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Overview of the Development of Train Travel in Poland

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Abstract

This paper presents an overview of the development of railway transport in Poland with particular emphasis on its role in tourism mobility. The main aim of the study is to analyse historical changes in the importance of railways as a mode of tourist travel and to identify contemporary trends influencing its development. The research is based on a review of historical sources, statistical reports, and transport policy documents. The paper discusses the dominant role of railways in mass tourism during the socialist period, the decline in passenger numbers following the political and economic transformation after 1989, and the gradual recovery of railway transport in the context of infrastructure modernization and European integration. The results indicate that railways are regaining importance in domestic tourism, especially in short-term travel and intercity mobility. The study also highlights the growing significance of sustainable transport policies and environmental awareness as key factors shaping the future development of railway tourism in Poland. The extent of whole paper is 22 pages A4

Keywords: railway transport; tourism mobility; sustainable transport; infrastructure modernization; Poland

Introduction

Rail transport has played a significant role in shaping patterns of mobility and tourism development in Poland for more than a century. From the late nineteenth century onwards, the expansion of railway networks enabled the growth of spa towns, mountain resorts, and coastal destinations by improving accessibility and reducing travel time. After the Second World War, railways became the dominant means of long-distance travel, supporting the development of mass tourism in the centrally planned economy of the Polish People's Republic (PRL).

The political and economic transformation initiated in 1989 fundamentally changed the structure of the transport system and travel behaviour of society. The rapid growth of private car ownership and the expansion of road infrastructure led to a decline in the importance of rail transport in both everyday mobility and tourism travel. At the same time, institutional reforms and the integration of Poland into the European transport system created new opportunities for the modernization and development of railway infrastructure.

In recent years, changing mobility patterns, increasing environmental awareness, and investments in transport infrastructure have contributed to the gradual revival of rail transport in Poland. Railways are becoming increasingly important in short-term tourism, intercity travel, and sustainable mobility strategies.

The aim of this paper is to present the evolution of railway transport in Poland from the post-war period to the present day and to analyse its changing role in tourism mobility. The study also seeks to identify contemporary trends and future development perspectives related to railway tourism in the context of economic transformation, technological progress, and climate policy. By combining historical analysis with statistical data and policy considerations, the paper attempts to fill the research gap concerning the long-term relationship between railway development and tourism mobility in Poland.

1. Rail Transport as the Main Mode of Tourist Travel in Post-War Poland (1945–1989)

1.1. Historical Background of the Development of Railway Tourism

The development of railway tourism in Poland has its roots in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the expanding railway network began to link major cities with emerging spa towns and mountain resorts. Rail lines built under the partitions connected industrial and administrative centres with destinations such as Zakopane, Krynica-Zdrój and the Baltic coast, which gradually turned into important leisure and health resorts. Regular train services made travel faster, safer and relatively affordable for a growing share of society, including the middle classes and organized groups of workers or students. In the interwar period, rail transport already played a key role in domestic tourism, supporting the growth of sanatoria, boarding houses and hotels in the main tourist regions of the country. These pre-war tourist centres and rail corridors survived, at least in part, the destruction of the Second World War and provided a territorial and institutional base for the further development of tourism in the socialist period. After 1945, the authorities could therefore build on an existing network of destinations and travel habits, while adapting them to the new political and economic conditions.

1.2. Reconstruction of Railway Infrastructure after the Second World War

The Second World War left the Polish railway system heavily damaged and disorganized. Large sections of track were destroyed or dismantled, many bridges and stations were blown up, signalling equipment was missing, and a significant part of the rolling stock had been destroyed or taken away. In the first post-war years, the main task of the Polish State Railways (Polskie Koleje Państwowe, PKP) was simply to restore basic functionality of the network and re-establish connections between the main regions of the country. Reconstruction works included not only rebuilding tracks and engineering structures, but also converting war-time temporary solutions into permanent infrastructure adapted to peacetime needs.

The period from 1945 to the early 1950s was marked by an intensive effort to reopen key lines and restore passenger services. In practice, this meant the gradual revival of long-distance routes between large cities as well as the re-activation of lines leading to traditional tourist

regions. The state treated railways as a strategic sector for economic recovery, industrialization and territorial integration, which translated into relatively high investment priority compared to other forms of transport. As more kilometres of track and bridges were rebuilt each year, the capacity of the system increased and trains could run more frequently and reliably. This process significantly improved overall mobility and created the basic conditions for the rebirth of holiday and leisure travel. By the mid-1950s, most of the pre-war network was again operational, which allowed the authorities and social organizations to plan organized holidays and excursions on a larger scale.

Reconstruction also had a qualitative dimension. Alongside repairs, PKP gradually introduced newer types of locomotives and passenger coaches, modernized stations and improved timetables. Although many elements of the system still relied on pre-war technology and makeshift solutions, the post-war decade laid the foundations for rail to function as the central pillar of mass passenger transport, including tourism, in the Polish People's Republic.

1.3. Railways in the System of Mass Tourism in the PRL

In the socialist period, rail transport became the dominant means of long-distance travel for the majority of the population and a key instrument for implementing the state's concept of mass tourism. Limited access to private cars, relatively low ticket prices and a dense network of lines meant that trains were the most accessible mode of transport for workers and their families. Railway connections linked industrial centres with the main tourist regions of the country, such as the Baltic coast, the Tatra Mountains, the Sudetes and the Masurian Lakes. For many people, travelling by train to a seaside resort or a mountain town became the typical form of summer or winter holiday.

The development of organized worker holidays strongly reinforced the role of railways in tourism. Trade unions, large state-owned enterprises and social organizations arranged subsidized holiday packages in coastal and mountain resorts, which included rail transport, accommodation and meals. Special group tickets and dedicated trains were introduced to handle the flow of participants to holiday centres at fixed dates, usually during the main summer and winter seasons. Seasonal trains, additional carriages and night services allowed the system to cope with the peaks of demand around school holidays and collective leave periods. In some cases, specific tourist products emerged that were closely tied to rail, such as so-called "wagon holidays", where old passenger coaches were adapted for use as simple accommodation in seaside resorts.

Railway travel in the People's Republic of Poland was not only a practical necessity but also an important social experience. Long journeys in shared compartments, overnight trips in couchette or regular coaches, and crowded station platforms formed part of the collective memory of several generations. For many citizens, the train was the main – and often only – means of seeing other regions of the country. In this sense, the railway contributed to a certain democratization of tourism by providing relatively cheap access to leisure destinations for broad social groups that could not have afforded individual motorized travel.

1.4. Limitations of Railway Transport at the End of the Socialist Period

From the late 1970s onwards, the railway system in Poland increasingly suffered from structural problems that reduced its attractiveness as a mode of tourist travel. Insufficient investment in infrastructure and rolling stock led to the progressive ageing of tracks, signalling equipment and passenger coaches. As a result, speed restrictions became more frequent, travel times lengthened and the risk of failures increased. Passengers often faced delays, overcrowded trains and a decline in travel comfort, especially during the peak holiday season. In many cases, the standard of services did not keep pace with growing expectations regarding punctuality, cleanliness and on-board amenities.

At the same time, the gradual spread of private car ownership and the development of road transport began to change the structure of domestic mobility. Although the level of motorization in Poland remained lower than in Western Europe, the possibility of travelling by car offered greater flexibility in terms of departure times, routes and choice of destination. For families and small groups, car travel became an attractive alternative to crowded and sometimes unreliable trains, particularly on shorter and medium-distance routes. This trend was reinforced by the perception that railways were outdated and underfunded, while roads and individual motorization symbolized modernity and personal freedom.

The economic crisis of the 1980s further aggravated the situation of the rail sector. Shortages of fuel and spare parts, limitations in investment programmes and difficulties in maintaining existing infrastructure increased the gap between the needs of passengers and the capabilities of the system. In the tourist sphere, this translated into a growing mismatch between the demand for comfortable, predictable travel and the supply of services actually offered by the railway. By the end of the socialist period, trains remained a mass means of transport, but they no longer enjoyed an unquestioned position as the most attractive way to reach tourist

destinations. This created a starting point for the profound changes in the transport system and travel patterns that would follow the political and economic transformation after 1989.

2.1. Political Transformation and the Functioning of Rail Transport in Poland

The political and economic transformation initiated in Poland in 1989 led to profound changes in the functioning of the national economy as well as the transport system. The transition from a centrally planned economy to a market-based system required the reorganization of many infrastructure sectors, including rail transport. In the period preceding the transformation, railways played a dominant role in passenger transport, serving as the primary means of mobility for the population in both everyday travel and tourism-related journeys. At that time, the transport system operated under conditions of central planning, and the limited availability of private vehicles contributed to the extensive use of public transport.

After 1989, significant changes occurred in the structure of the transport system. Economic liberalization and market opening contributed to the rapid development of road transport, particularly through a substantial increase in the number of private cars. As a result, the model of social mobility gradually changed, with individual transport gaining increasing importance. Rail transport began to lose its dominant position in passenger transport, largely due to the growing competitiveness of road transport and shifts in travel preferences among the population.

These changes also had a direct impact on tourism mobility. During the period of centrally planned economy, a considerable proportion of tourist travel was carried out using rail transport, which enabled large-scale movement of people to major tourist destinations such as the Baltic coast and mountain regions. However, with the expansion of private car ownership and the improvement of road infrastructure, an increasing share of tourist journeys began to be undertaken by private vehicles. This development enhanced the flexibility of travel and allowed tourists to select destinations independently of railway accessibility.

Another consequence of these transformations was a noticeable decline in the number of passengers using rail transport during the early years of the transition period. In the 1990s, a significant reduction in passenger rail services was recorded. This trend resulted both from the growing competition of road transport and from the deteriorating condition of railway infrastructure, as well as from the reduction of less economically viable connections. In many

cases, the closure of railway services particularly affected smaller towns and peripheral regions that had previously been served by regional railway networks.

At the same time, the political transformation created the foundations for subsequent reforms in the railway sector. During the 1990s, the first measures were undertaken to adapt the functioning of railways to the realities of a market economy. These actions included the reduction of unprofitable services, restructuring of employment, and initial attempts to modernize transport infrastructure. In the following years, these efforts evolved into broader reforms of the railway sector, which introduced new institutional arrangements and gradually led to the modernization of railway infrastructure.

In summary, the political transformation brought significant changes to the functioning of rail transport in Poland as well as to the overall model of social mobility. The declining importance of railways in passenger transport, combined with the rapid development of road transport, contributed to a shift in the structure of tourism-related travel, in which individual transport began to play an increasingly important role. At the same time, this period laid the groundwork for later reforms and infrastructure investments that aimed to improve the competitiveness of rail transport in subsequent years.

2.2. Restructuring and Institutional Reforms of the Railway Sector after 1989

The transformation of the Polish railway sector in the period following 1989 was closely connected with broader economic reforms and the need to adapt the transport system to the principles of a market economy. During the socialist period, the railway system operated as a centralized state enterprise under the structure of Polskie Koleje Państwowe. Its activities were largely determined by centrally planned economic objectives rather than by market demand or economic efficiency. As a consequence, the system was characterized by high levels of employment, extensive infrastructure networks, and a large number of passenger services that were not always economically justified.

In the early years of transformation, the railway sector faced significant structural challenges. These included declining passenger numbers, deteriorating infrastructure, and growing competition from road transport. At the same time, the financial condition of the railway sector worsened due to decreasing revenues and the high costs of maintaining an extensive infrastructure network. These circumstances created a need for comprehensive restructuring aimed at improving the efficiency and competitiveness of rail transport in Poland.

A major step in the restructuring process was the adoption of the Act on the Commercialization and Restructuring of the State Enterprise PKP in 2000. This reform fundamentally transformed the organizational structure of the Polish railway system by separating the previously unified enterprise into a number of specialized companies responsible for different areas of activity. The reform introduced a model in which infrastructure management, passenger transport, and freight operations were performed by separate entities. As a result, the company PKP Polskie Linie Kolejowe S.A. became responsible for managing railway infrastructure, while passenger services were gradually transferred to companies such as PKP Intercity and PKP Przewozy Regionalne.

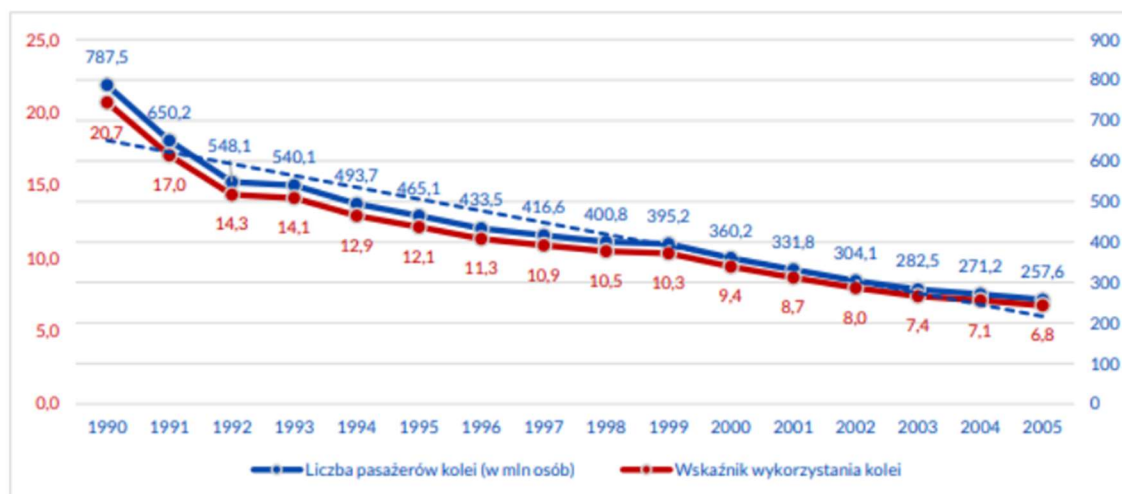
These institutional reforms were also closely linked to the process of Poland's integration with the European Union. European transport policy promoted the liberalization of railway markets and the separation of infrastructure management from transport operations in order to increase competition and improve service quality. Consequently, the restructuring of the Polish railway sector was aligned with European regulatory frameworks that aimed to create a more competitive and efficient railway system.

At the same time, the restructuring process involved significant organizational and economic adjustments. Employment in the railway sector was reduced considerably, and many unprofitable railway lines were either closed or had their services significantly limited. While these measures were intended to improve the financial sustainability of the railway system, they also had negative consequences for transport accessibility in some regions, particularly in rural and peripheral areas. In several cases, the reduction of railway services contributed to the increased reliance on road transport and further strengthened the dominance of individual mobility.

Despite these challenges, the restructuring process created the institutional foundations for later modernization and development of the railway sector. The introduction of a new organizational structure, combined with regulatory reforms and the gradual liberalization of the transport market, enabled the railway system to adapt more effectively to the changing conditions of the transport sector. These reforms also prepared the ground for large-scale infrastructure investments that were implemented in the following years, particularly after Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004.

Figure 3. Number of railway passengers in Poland in 1990–2023

Rys. 3. Liczba pasażerów kolei normalnotorowej (w mln) i wskaźnik wykorzystania kolei w latach 1990-2005



Źródło. Opracowanie własne na podstawie danych GUS i UTK.

Source: elaboration based on data from the Office of Rail Transport (UTK).

From the perspective of tourism mobility, the restructuring of the railway sector had a mixed impact. On the one hand, the reduction of regional services limited railway accessibility to some tourist destinations. On the other hand, the gradual modernization of the railway system and the introduction of more efficient operational structures created the potential for improving long-distance passenger services connecting major urban and tourist centers. These developments later contributed to the renewed importance of rail transport in selected segments of tourism mobility, particularly in intercity travel and short-term tourism such as city-break tourism.

2.3. Modernization of Railway Infrastructure and Integration with the European Transport System

A significant turning point in the development of the Polish railway sector occurred after Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004. Membership in the EU enabled access to substantial financial resources from European structural and cohesion funds, which were allocated to the modernization of transport infrastructure. As a result, railway transport began to undergo a gradual process of technological and infrastructural transformation aimed at

improving efficiency, safety, and competitiveness within the broader European transport network.

One of the primary objectives of modernization policies was the improvement of railway infrastructure, particularly on major national and international corridors. Investments focused on the reconstruction of railway lines, modernization of signaling systems, and adaptation of infrastructure to higher operating speeds. In many cases, these projects significantly reduced travel times between the largest urban centers in Poland. The modernization of key routes, including those connecting Warsaw with Kraków, Gdańsk, and Wrocław, contributed to a noticeable improvement in the quality and attractiveness of rail transport.

Another important aspect of modernization was the gradual integration of the Polish railway system with the European transport network. Poland became part of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T), which aims to create a coherent and efficient transport infrastructure across European countries. Participation in this network facilitated the modernization of major railway corridors and promoted the implementation of common technical standards, including advanced traffic management systems such as the European Rail Traffic Management System (ERTMS). These changes enhanced interoperability between national railway systems and strengthened Poland's position within the European transport framework.

The modernization of infrastructure also contributed to improvements in passenger comfort and service quality. Railway stations underwent significant redevelopment, rolling stock was gradually modernized, and new high-standard passenger services were introduced. A notable example was the introduction of high-speed rolling stock on selected routes, which significantly shortened travel times and increased the competitiveness of rail transport compared with road and air transport.

From the perspective of tourism mobility, infrastructure modernization played a crucial role in improving accessibility to major tourist destinations. Faster and more reliable railway connections between large cities encouraged the development of tourism patterns based on shorter trips, including weekend tourism and city-break travel. Improved rail connections between metropolitan areas and tourist regions enhanced the attractiveness of rail travel as an alternative to individual car transport.

Statistical data indicate that the modernization process contributed to a gradual recovery in passenger numbers after the decline observed in the 1990s and early 2000s. Reports published by Urząd Transportu Kolejowego show that the number of railway passengers in Poland began to increase steadily after 2010, reflecting improvements in infrastructure quality, service

reliability, and travel times. This trend suggests that infrastructure investments and institutional reforms helped restore part of the railway sector's competitiveness within the national transport system.

In summary, the modernization of railway infrastructure after Poland's accession to the European Union marked a crucial stage in the transformation of the railway sector. The combination of infrastructure investments, integration with European transport networks, and improvements in passenger services contributed to the gradual revival of rail transport in Poland. These developments also created new opportunities for the growth of tourism mobility, particularly in the context of intercity travel and short-term tourism.

2.4. Changes in the Model of Tourism Mobility and the Role of Rail Transport

The transformation of the Polish transport system after 1989 was accompanied by profound changes in tourism mobility patterns. The transition from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented system significantly influenced the structure of passenger transport and the preferences of travellers. During the socialist period, tourism mobility was largely based on collective transport, particularly railways, which played a central role in transporting large numbers of passengers to major tourist destinations such as the Baltic coast and mountain regions. However, the political and economic transformation initiated in 1989 marked the beginning of a gradual shift toward a new mobility model characterized by the increasing dominance of individual transport.

In the first decade following the transformation (approximately 1989–2000), one of the most visible processes was the rapid growth of private car ownership. Economic liberalization, the opening of the domestic market, and increasing household incomes contributed to a significant expansion of individual mobility. As a consequence, rail transport experienced a noticeable decline in passenger numbers throughout the 1990s. During this period, many railway services, particularly regional connections, were reduced or discontinued due to declining demand and financial constraints. The increasing importance of road transport also influenced tourism mobility, as tourists increasingly chose private cars for both short and long-distance leisure travel.

The early 2000s marked the beginning of gradual changes in this trend. Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004 created new opportunities for the modernization of railway infrastructure through access to European structural and cohesion funds. Between

approximately 2004 and 2015, numerous infrastructure projects were implemented, focusing on the modernization of major railway corridors and the improvement of passenger services. These investments significantly reduced travel times between major cities and improved the reliability and comfort of railway transport.

At the same time, new tourism patterns began to emerge, particularly in the 2010s. Economic development, urbanization, and the diversification of tourism demand contributed to the increasing popularity of short-term leisure travel. Forms of tourism such as city-break tourism, weekend travel, and short urban visits became more common, especially among residents of large metropolitan areas. These forms of tourism mobility are typically based on relatively short travel distances between major urban centers, which often makes rail transport a competitive alternative to private car travel.

In this context, the role of rail transport in tourism mobility began to increase again, particularly after 2010. Modernized railway connections between major Polish cities such as Warsaw, Kraków, Gdańsk, and Wrocław improved accessibility and reduced travel times, making rail travel more attractive for leisure purposes. Improvements in rolling stock, service quality, and timetable coordination further contributed to the growing popularity of rail travel on intercity routes.

Statistical data confirm this trend. Reports published by Urząd Transportu Kolejowego indicate that the number of railway passengers in Poland began to increase steadily after 2010, following the significant decline observed during the 1990s and early 2000s. This growth reflects both infrastructure modernization and changes in travel preferences, including a renewed interest in collective transport for certain types of journeys.

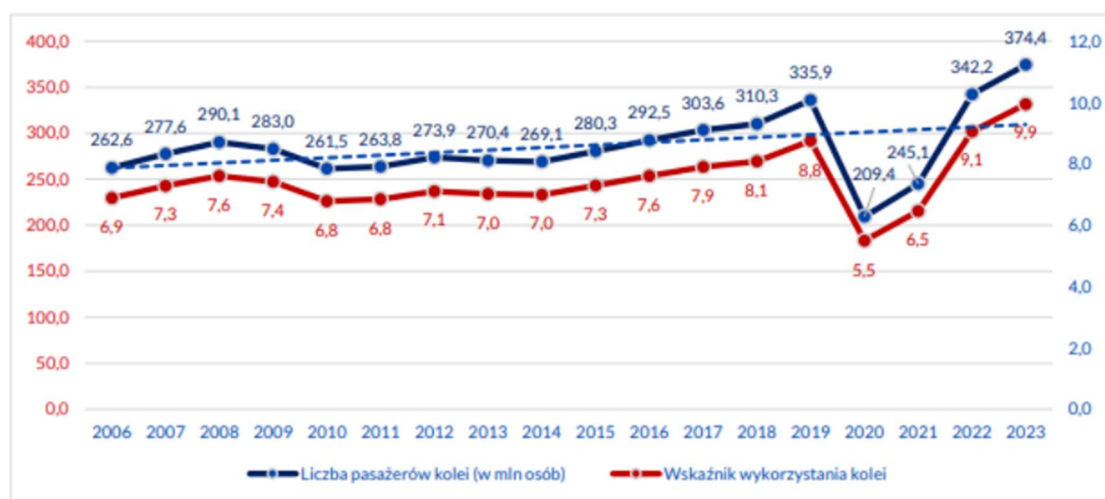
Another factor influencing the growing role of rail transport in tourism mobility during the 2010s was the increasing awareness of environmental issues and the importance of sustainable transport solutions. Compared with road and air transport, railways produce significantly lower greenhouse gas emissions per passenger, which has strengthened their position as a more environmentally sustainable mode of transport. As environmental considerations began to influence travel decisions more strongly in the late 2010s, rail transport gained additional relevance in the context of sustainable tourism.

In summary, between 1989 and 2019 the model of tourism mobility in Poland underwent a significant transformation. The early post-transition period was characterized by the rapid expansion of individual mobility and a decline in railway passenger transport. However, infrastructure modernization, economic development, and the emergence of new tourism trends gradually contributed to the renewed importance of rail transport, particularly in the segment

of intercity travel and short-term tourism. These developments laid the foundations for the contemporary role of railways within the tourism mobility system in Poland.

Figure 2. Number of railway passengers and railway usage rate in Poland in 2006–2023.

Rys. 4. Liczba pasażerów kolei normalnotorowej (w mln) i wskaźnik wykorzystania kolei w latach 2006-2023



Source: elaboration based on data from the Office of Rail Transport and GUS.

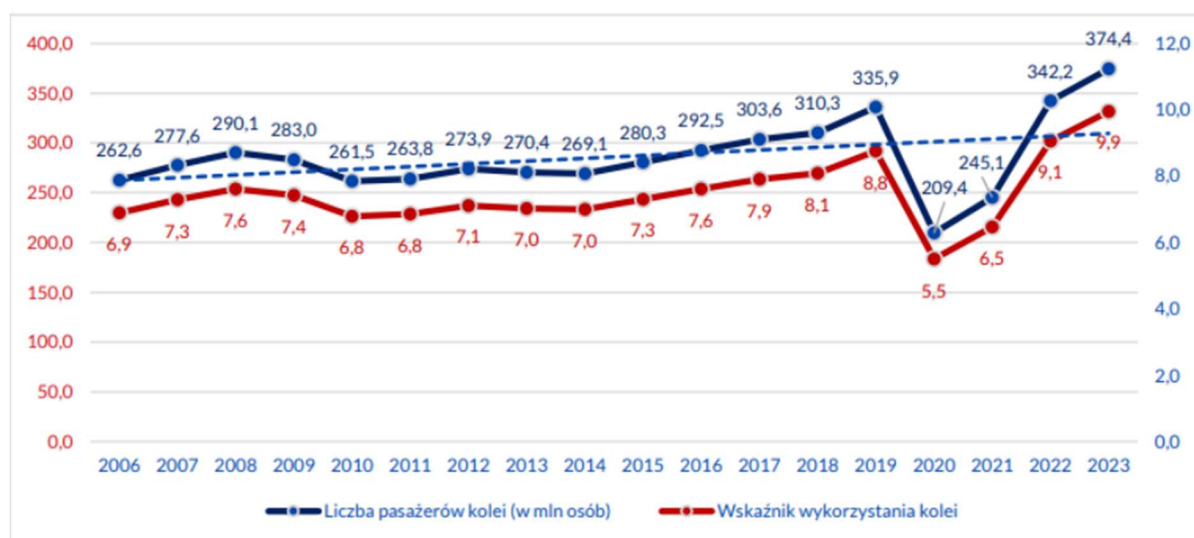
3. Contemporary Role of Railways in Tourism and Development Perspectives (2019–Future)

Current State of Rail Transport in Poland

In recent years, rail transport in Poland has experienced dynamic growth, both in terms of infrastructure modernization and passenger demand. Since 2019, the Polish railway market has been characterized by increasing competitiveness, improved service quality, and expanding connectivity between major urban centers and key tourist destinations.

The number of railway passengers has steadily increased, reflecting a broader European trend of returning to rail as a reliable and environmentally friendly mode of transport. Despite temporary disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2021, passenger numbers recovered rapidly in subsequent years. According to national transport statistics, in 2023 Polish railways transported over 374.4 million passengers, which represents the highest result recorded in the 21st century. Moreover, the railway usage indicator reached nearly 10 journeys per inhabitant per year, confirming the growing importance of rail transport in everyday mobility and tourism.

Figure 4. Number of railway passengers and railway usage indicator in Poland, 2006–2023.



Source: based on data from the Office of Rail Transport (UTK).

The data presented in the figure show a generally upward trend in rail passenger traffic, particularly visible after 2015. A significant decline occurred in 2020, when the number of passengers dropped to approximately 209.4 million, mainly due to pandemic-related mobility

restrictions. However, the following years were characterized by a dynamic recovery, with strong increases in passenger numbers recorded in 2021, 2022, and 2023. This trend indicates the growing competitiveness of rail transport compared to other modes of travel and highlights its increasing importance in domestic tourism flows.

Contemporary railway services in Poland include long-distance intercity connections, regional commuter trains, and tourist-oriented routes that provide access to major natural and cultural attractions. The modernization of rolling stock, the introduction of digital ticketing systems, and improvements in punctuality and travel comfort have contributed to increasing passenger satisfaction. As a result, rail transport plays an increasingly important role in facilitating tourism mobility, enabling both domestic and international visitors to travel efficiently, safely, and in a more environmentally sustainable way.

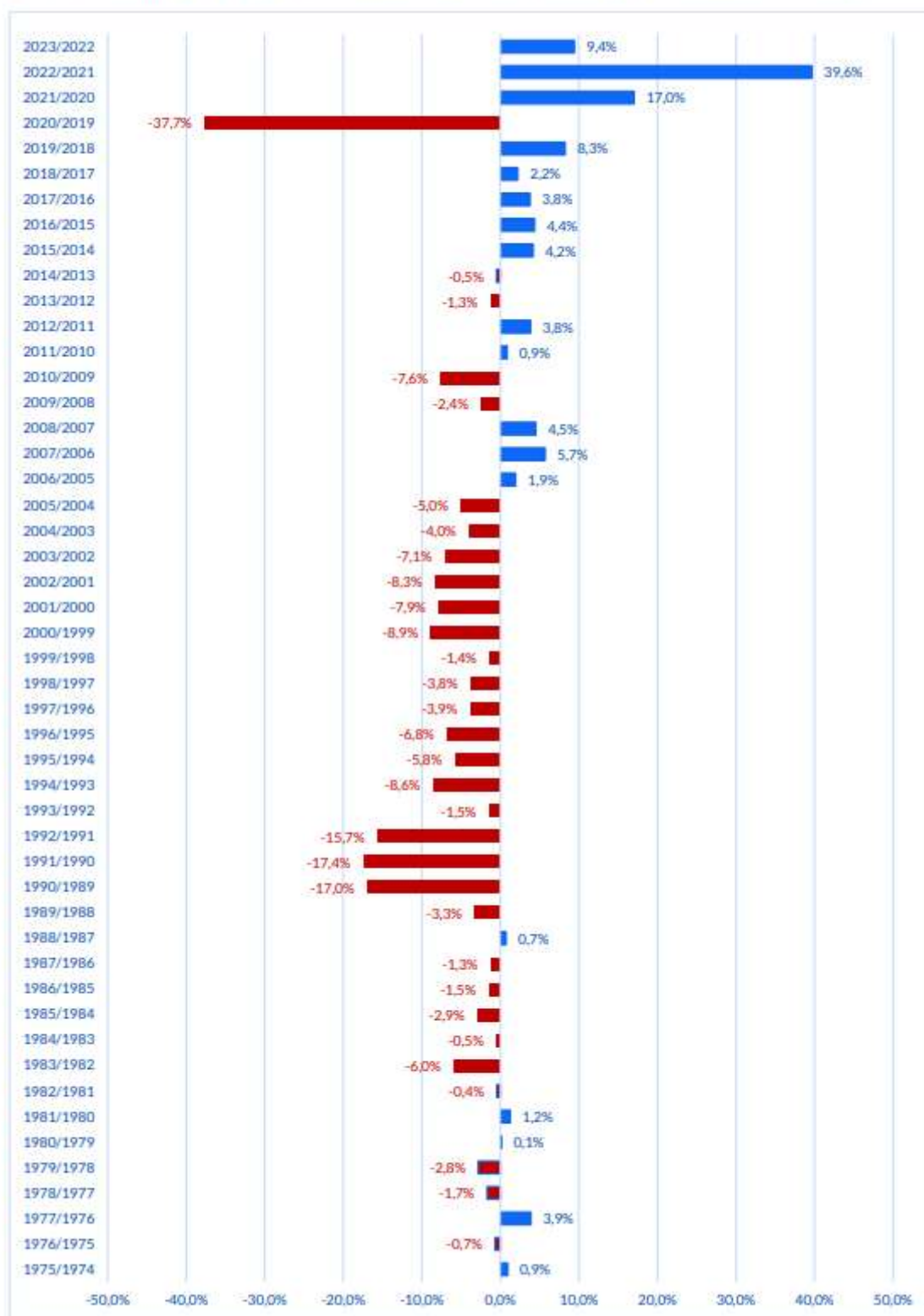
3.2. Impact of New Mobility Trends on the Development of Railway Tourism

Recent mobility trends have significantly influenced the development of railway tourism in Poland. One of the most notable trends is the growing popularity of short-term tourism, including weekend trips and city breaks. Railways provide convenient access to urban cultural centres, natural attractions, and heritage sites, making them particularly attractive for short leisure journeys.

At the same time, travellers' transport preferences are evolving. Modern passengers increasingly value safety, comfort, punctuality, and environmental responsibility. Rail transport meets many of these expectations by offering competitive travel times, reduced travel stress compared to road transport, and relatively low environmental impact.

Figure 5 presents the year-to-year dynamics of changes in the number of railway passengers in Poland.

Rys. 5. Dynamika zmiany liczby pasażerów kolei rok do roku w latach 1974-2023 (w %)



Źródło. Opracowanie własne na podstawie danych GUS i UTK.

Source: elaboration based on data from the Office of Rail Transport and GUS.

The data presented in the chart clearly illustrate the impact of external factors on passenger mobility. A particularly significant decline occurred in 2020, when railway passenger traffic decreased by 37.7% compared to the previous year, which was the largest drop observed in the last fifty years. In contrast, the following years were characterised by dynamic growth, with passenger numbers increasing by 17% in 2021, 39.6% in 2022, and 9.4% in 2023. These fluctuations reflect changing travel behaviours, including temporary limitations on tourism mobility during the pandemic and the subsequent return to public transport in the recovery period.

Another important trend is the rising importance of low-emission transport. As awareness of climate change increases, both tourists and policymakers are promoting sustainable travel options. Railways are increasingly perceived as a “green” alternative to air and car transport, particularly for domestic and regional journeys. The post-pandemic increase in passenger numbers confirms that rail transport is strengthening its role in tourism mobility and adapting to contemporary mobility trends.

3.3. Railways in the Concept of Sustainable Transport and Climate Policy

Rail transport plays a crucial role in achieving sustainable mobility objectives and implementing climate policies at both national and European levels. Compared to other modes of transport, trains generate significantly lower greenhouse gas emissions per passenger-kilometer. Consequently, the development of railway infrastructure and services is considered a key strategy for reducing the environmental footprint of the transport sector.

In Poland, railway modernization programs are closely linked to broader sustainability goals, including the electrification of lines, the introduction of energy-efficient rolling stock, and the promotion of intermodal transport solutions. These measures support the transition towards a low-carbon transport system while enhancing accessibility to tourist destinations.

Moreover, railways contribute to balanced regional development by improving connectivity between peripheral areas and major economic centers. This increased accessibility can stimulate tourism growth in less-developed regions, helping to distribute tourist flows more evenly and reduce overtourism in the most popular destinations.

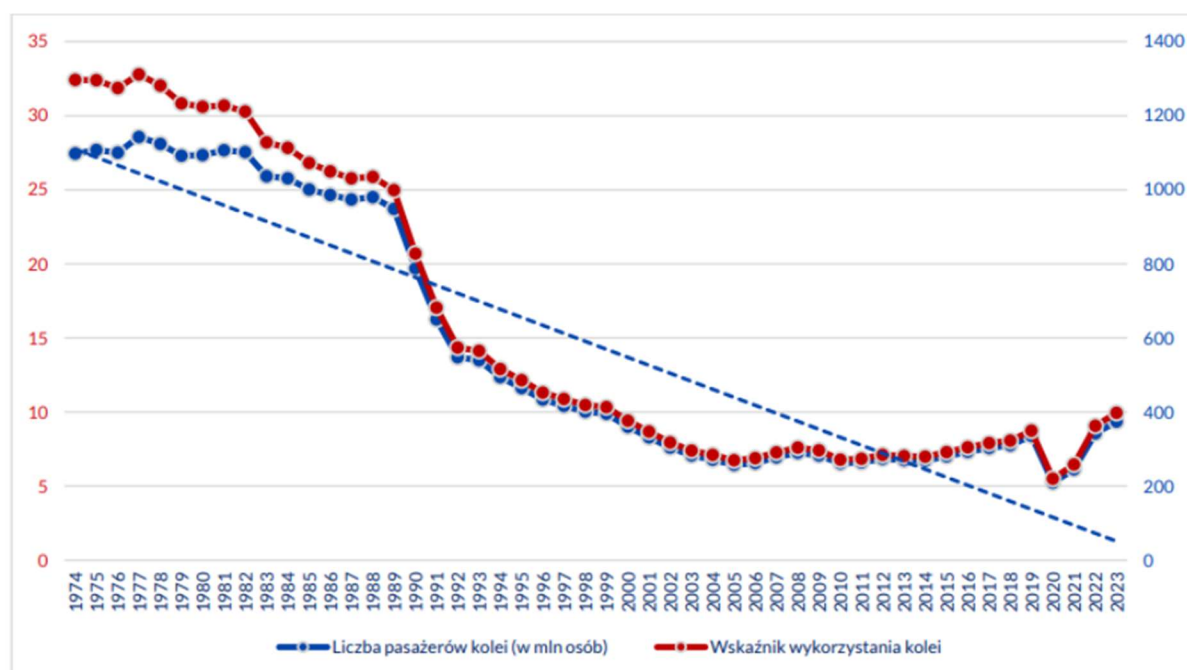
3.4. Potential Directions for the Development of Railway Tourism in Poland

The future development of railway tourism in Poland will depend on several key factors, including infrastructure investments, technological innovations, and evolving patterns of tourist mobility. Large-scale projects such as high-speed rail connections, further electrification of regional lines, and the modernization of railway stations are expected to enhance travel efficiency, accessibility, and passenger comfort.

Technological advancements, including digital travel planning platforms, integrated ticketing systems, and real-time passenger information services, will further improve the attractiveness of rail transport. In addition, the development of thematic tourist routes, heritage railways, and cross-border connections may diversify tourism offerings and strengthen Poland's position within the European railway network.

Long-term trends in railway passenger transport provide an important context for assessing future development potential.

Figure 1 presents changes in the number of railway passengers and the railway usage indicator in Poland between 1974 and 2023.



Source: elaboration based on data from the Office of Rail Transport and GUS.

The data indicate that railway transport played a dominant role in Poland in the 1970s and 1980s, when annual passenger numbers exceeded one billion. This was followed by a significant decline after the economic transformation of the 1990s, largely due to the rapid growth of individual car transport and the expansion of road infrastructure. However, the gradual increase in passenger numbers observed in recent years suggests a renewed interest in rail travel and highlights the potential for further development of railway tourism.

Growing tourist mobility, combined with increasing environmental awareness, suggests that railways will play an even more significant role in the transport system of the future. If supported by consistent transport policies, infrastructure modernization programmes, and sustainable investment strategies, railway tourism in Poland has strong potential for continued expansion and innovation in the coming decades

Conclusions

The development of train travel in Poland reflects broader political, economic and social transformations that have taken place since the end of the Second World War. In the post-war decades, railways played a central role in rebuilding national mobility, supporting mass tourism and enabling large-scale access to seaside and mountain destinations for broad social groups. At the same time, the socialist model of transport, based on central planning and limited car ownership, created favourable conditions for the dominance of rail in both everyday mobility and tourism.

The political and economic transformation after 1989 fundamentally changed this model. The rapid growth of individual motorization, the liberalization of the transport market and the restructuring of the railway sector led to a decline in passenger numbers and a loss of rail's dominant position in tourist travel. Many regional lines were closed or significantly reduced, which particularly affected smaller towns and peripheral tourist areas. However, these difficult adjustments also created the institutional and financial foundations for later modernization, especially in connection with Poland's accession to the European Union and access to European funds.

In the last two decades, rail transport in Poland has been gradually regaining importance in selected segments of the market. Investments in infrastructure, rolling stock and service quality have improved travel times and comfort on key routes, which is particularly visible in intercity and regional connections serving major urban and tourist centres. At the same time, the growing

importance of environmental and climate policy has strengthened the position of rail as a low-emission and energy-efficient mode of transport. For tourism, this creates new opportunities to develop sustainable mobility solutions that combine accessibility, comfort and a reduced environmental footprint.

The future role of railways in tourism mobility in Poland will depend on the consistency of infrastructure investments, the further integration of rail with other modes of transport and the ability to adapt services to changing travel patterns. If modernization efforts are continued and accompanied by policies that promote sustainable tourism, railways may once again become a key pillar of domestic and international tourist travel, while contributing to balanced regional development and the reduction of transport-related emissions.

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