

Narratives on face mask wearing from members of Navigating Knowledge Landscapes Network - the contribution No. 14

Country: **POLAND**

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In Poland, it has been mandatory to wear a face mask in public since the 16th of April 2019. This law applies to all open public spaces, such as streets, parks, boulevards, botanical gardens, etc., with the only exception being forests. The law also applies to closed spaces, including shops, malls, public institutions, and private offices (when dealing with clients or the public), as well as to vehicles: public transport and private cars while traveling with someone from beyond your immediate household. It is binding on all adults and children over four years old, if not exempted for justified medical reasons. Non-compliance is punishable by a fine of 500 zloty (about 125 euros). Administrative punishments, applicable to relevant subjects, are much higher: ranging from 5,000 to 30,000 zloty (about 1200-6,500 euros).

In practice, the law is respected to varying degrees, and with different attitudes. It is more consistently obeyed in big cities, and less so in villages and little towns, where the lower density of the population creates an often illusory sense of security. Also, one can observe many cases of half-compliance or sham compliance. For instance, people do wear masks, but slide them down onto their chins, or take them off completely while talking to someone on the street or speaking on the phone. And this is all a performance, keeping their masks somewhere within reach in case of the sudden emergence of police officers, who are indeed issuing fines for not wearing a mask). Masks are widely accessible: FFP2 or even professional FFP3 masks are easy to obtain online, while local tailors are trying to compensate for decreasing income by sewing regular masks from trendy fabrics. Single-use surgical masks and face shields are also available in most pharmacies. Still, many people wear only provisional, single-use masks, and wear them sloppily, or cover their mouths only with scarfs.

Personally, I wear a N95 mask with all due care. According to the research conducted at Jagiellonian University, 2% of Kraków's population has already experienced COVID-19 in an asymptomatic way, which shows that we are still far from gaining any herd immunity. The

examples of other countries, such as neighbouring Slovakia – which having introduced the obligation to wear a facemask almost a month earlier, has managed to keep the spread of the virus under control – suggests that despite the WHO’s initial doubts, the obligation to wear a face mask is an effective measure in the fight against COVID-19, and is adoptable at relatively low social cost. But at the same time, I would welcome a loosening of the rules in the summertime, when the virus will be at its weakest, and our human immunity at its highest.