

PRL Universe

Polish People's Republic

Everyday Absurdities and Symbols
of Power in *Central Warsaw*



Explore the Polish People's Republic through the tension
between ordinary life and monumental urban symbolism.



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Practical Information



Starting location

Museum of Life under Communism, Piękna 28/34
Central Warsaw, Poland.



Distance: About 4.5 km by foot

Duration: 140 - 160 minutes



Material Needed

Charged phone; headphones (optional); digital or printed map; comfortable shoes; a pen or pencil and a blank piece of paper for the creative task.



Accessibility Level

Easy to medium; longer flat central urban route; several stops can be delivered from the exterior if interior access is unavailable.



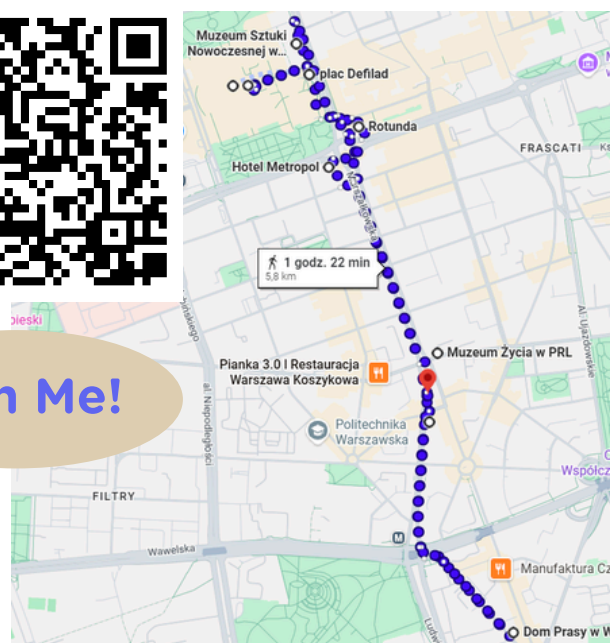
Target Audience

Young people aged 16 to 30; mixed groups; no prior knowledge required.

**Scan the QR code
to see the map
and explore the full tour.**



Scan Me!





Tour Introduction

Welcome to the „PRL Universe"! Have you ever wondered what it's like to live in a world where the authorities try to control a citizen's every move - from the signs illuminating the streets to what you can buy for dinner? Today's centre of Warsaw is a former, gigantic propaganda stage. During this walk, we will unmask the monumental buildings to see the absurd and fascinating daily lives of people who simply had to... survive in this system. Stay sharp and learn to read the city between the lines.



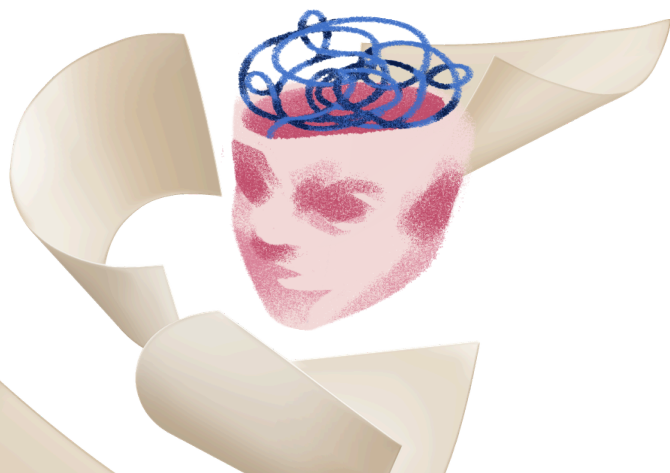
How did ordinary people manage to create their own normal world beneath the armour of monumental ideology and the absurd demands of the authorities?



This question should accompany you at every step. It encourages you to look at the grand buildings not as ordinary monuments, but as the 'scenography' in a spectacle called the

“PRL Universe”

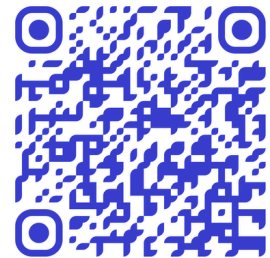
- one that the residents of Warsaw had to face every day and learned to cleverly navigate.



Stop #1: Museum of Life under Communism, Piękna 28/34

Domestic life, shortage, and the material culture of adaptation.

We start at the micro-scale - inside an apartment in a panel block. The official propaganda of the 1970s and 1980s promised modernity and prosperity, but the daily reality for citizens was hidden in empty shelves and hours-long queues. The PRL's planned economy suffered from a permanent shortage of basic goods. To manage the economic crisis, the authorities introduced ration cards for sugar in 1976, and during Martial Law (after 1981), rationing expanded to almost everything: from meat, butter, and flour, to shoes and petrol. The regime tried to control private life through enforced uniformity - from the uniform packaging of „Ixi” washing powder to identical „Kowalski” wall units in every living room. Here, we see how grand ideology collided with the daily need for resourcefulness, where every object repaired by domestic means became a small act of autonomy.



Scan Me!

Now that we have seen the cramped, strictly controlled, and shortage-ridden interiors of apartments, let's step outside. Notice how dramatically the scale grows - we are heading to Constitution Square, which in the 1950s was designed as a gigantic, public stage for the new socialist society.

NEXT STEP



Walk towards Plac Konstytucji (Constitution Square)

Use this transition to notice how the scale changes from interiors and objects to streets and monumental urban composition.

Stop #2: Plac Konstytucji (Constitution Square)

The city as a stage for socialist order.

You are standing in the very heart of one of the finest examples of Socialist Realism in Europe, officially opened on July 22, 1952 - the day the new Constitution of the PRL was proclaimed. Socialist Realist architecture („socialist in content, national in form") had a clear task: to intimidate the individual and awe the masses. The monumental scale, perfect symmetry, and vast, open space were designed with mass May Day parades and grand political rallies in mind. This square is a grand urban theatre. The three massive candelabra streetlamps and powerful arcades were meant to echo classical designs, but their true purpose was to script human behaviour and movement in a public space where the individual was meant to feel tiny against the power of the state.



Look around the square and find one of the grand reliefs depicting workers on the walls. Notice their heroic poses.

If you were to add one realistic, unpolished detail of daily life to this stone propaganda scene, what would it be? Share your reflection with the group.

Let's continue along the Marszałkowska Housing District (MDM). Take a closer look at the facades of the residential buildings here - this is exactly where ideology and propaganda were carved directly into stone.

NEXT STEP

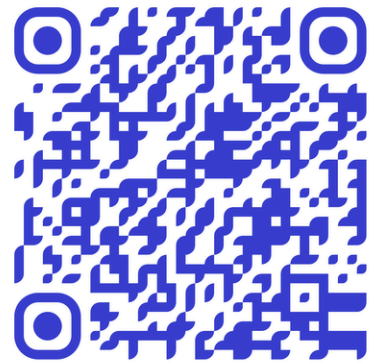


Continue through the Marszałkowska Housing District (MDM), directing attention to facades, arcades and sculptural details.

Stop #3: Marszałkowska Housing District, MDM

Propaganda carved into everyday space.

The MDM, constructed between 1950 and 1952, was meant to fulfil a Stalinist decree: „bringing the working class into the city centre." Since pre-war Warsaw had been a bourgeois city, the new regime wanted to populate the rebuilt centre with loyal workers. The monumental reliefs you see on the walls depict an idealised, reconstructed society: proud steelworkers, bricklayers who were leaders in labour efficiency, teachers, and mothers with children. This was a visual lesson in who, according to official propaganda, was building the new Poland. However, beneath this facade of beautiful decorations lay a game of appearances – the apartments, though modern for their time with central heating and bathrooms, were very cramped, and allocations depended heavily on political loyalty to the Party.



Scan Me!

The regime controlled the architecture of squares, streets, and apartment allocations, but the system also required an absolute monopoly on information. Let's move towards the building at Marszałkowska 3/5, which housed the media heart of that era.

NEXT STEP



Walk towards Press House. Marszałkowska 3/5

Stop #4: Dom Prasy (Press House), Marszałkowska 3/5

Media, propaganda and continuity under pressure.

This modernist building, erected between 1926 and 1927, reminds us that control in the PRL did not end with architecture - it was hidden in censored words. After World War II, the building was taken over by the RSW "Prasa-Książka-Ruch" conglomerate, and from here, every morning, "Trybuna Ludu" - the official newspaper of the PZPR (Polish United Workers' Party) - and the popular "Życie Warszawy" were distributed across Poland. The Press House is a site of extraordinary continuity under pressure, which after 1945 became the main factory of communist propaganda. It shows how urban space served the regime to systematically control people's minds.



Imagine living in a time when there is no internet, and the only source of information about the world (press, radio, television) is controlled by a single political party.

How would you try to verify what is true and what is a lie? Where would you seek knowledge? Talk about this in pairs or two groups.

Now that we know how the regime controlled the written word at the Press House, let's continue down Marszałkowska Street towards Dmowskiego Roundabout. We will see a place that in the 1960s was meant to become Warsaw's modern showcase, but for ordinary people, it was primarily a centre of unofficial trade and a hunt for luxury.

NEXT STEP



Continue towards Hotel Metropol.

Stop #5: Hotel Metropol, corner of Marszałkowska Street and Aleje Jerozolimskie

Tourism, modernity and the design of socialist city life.

You are standing at a spot that in the 1960s was meant to become Warsaw's new, Western showcase. Opened in 1965, the Metropol Hotel impressed with its modern, glass facade, while the nearby light Cepelia pavilion from 1966 (designed by Zygmunt Stępiński) was intended to promote Polish folk art. However, beneath this armour of modernity lay a fascinating "game of appearances." The area around the hotel was the heart of Warsaw's black market. This was the kingdom of „cinkciarze” - illegal currency changers. Under the watchful eye of the militia, citizens bought US dollars from them just to get a taste of luxury at Pewex stores: to buy foreign jeans, LEGO bricks or real Coca-Cola.



Just a few steps separate this luxury spot from another symbol of modern 1960s Warsaw. Let's cross the street to the characteristic, round building of the Rotunda, where modern architecture became intertwined with a great tragedy.

NEXT STEP



Walk to Rotunda PKO.

Stop #6: Rotunda PKO, Marszałkowska 100/102

Catastrophe, reconstruction and the question of authenticity.

Here is the Rotunda - completed in 1966 as the architectural crown of the so-called Eastern Wall, designed by Jerzy Jakubowicz. Its unique roof resembles saw teeth or a general's cap, instantly becoming a symbol of the capital's modernity. However, on February 15, 1979, at 12:37 PM, this site became the scene of one of the greatest tragedies in the city's post-war history. A massive gas explosion almost completely destroyed the building, killing 49 people and injuring over 100. Rumours and conspiracy theories immediately sparked around the disaster, exposing the citizens' total lack of trust in official state announcements. The building was rebuilt in record time - just eight months - and in 2019, it was replaced by a contemporary, lighter structure.



*Stand near the memorial plaque. The official version claimed it was an accident (a gas explosion), but in 1979, people whispered about a bank heist or a bomb, because they didn't trust the state media. **How does a lack of trust in the authorities affect how people react to crises? Do we still believe in conspiracy theories more easily today when we distrust institutions?***

Let's leave Dmowskiego Roundabout and walk through the underground passages - which were a labyrinth of PRL trade in themselves - towards Parade Square. We will stand at the feet of a giant that dominated not only the skyline but the entire life of Warsaw.

NEXT STEP



Walk towards the Palace of Culture and Science.

Stop #7: Palace of Culture and Science, Plac Defilad 1

Monumentality, gratitude and the language of domination.

Erected between 1952 and 1955 as a „gift from the Soviet nation to the Polish nation“, the Palace of Culture and Science (PKiN) stands at 237 meters and still sparks extreme emotions. Lev Rudnev's design, combining Socialist Realism with elements of Polish Renaissance, was a brutal demonstration of Soviet dominance over Poland after WWII. To make room for this gigantic building, a grid of dozens of pre-war streets and tenements that had survived the bombings was leveled. The Palace was meant to display the might of communism and control the urban space - it was visible from almost every corner of the capital. It became the central stage for the official PZPR congresses in the Congress Hall, but paradoxically also the venue where The Rolling Stones played in 1967, letting a breath of Western freedom into the PRL.



In your opinion, should architecture imposed by a dictatorship be destroyed, or preserved as a warning and a witness to history?



Let's turn our backs to the massive tower of the Palace and look at the vast concrete square around it.

Let's move to Parade Square, to the spot where the most important grandstand in the country once stood.

NEXT STEP

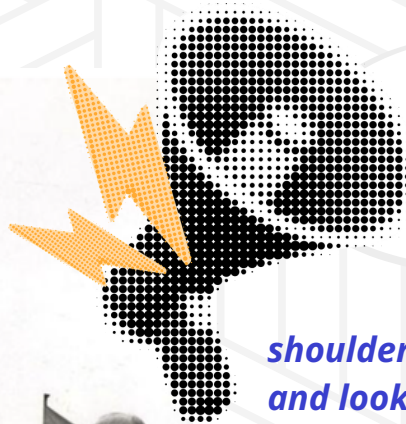


Move into Plac Defilad.

Stop #8: Plac Defilad (Defilad Square)

Ceremonies, parades and the choreography of consensus.

Parade Square was created at the same time as the Palace of Culture and was the largest urban square in Central Europe. It was here, in front of the stone honorary grandstand, that gigantic, carefully choreographed rallies, May Day parades, and military defilades took place. The most pivotal moment in the square's history occurred on October 24, 1956. During the political thaw, the new party leader Władysław Gomułka addressed hundreds of thousands of people here, promising reforms and the end of Stalinist terror. This space, designed for the mass control of human behavior and for showcasing loyalty to the regime, rapidly transformed after 1989 into a gigantic, wild, free-market bazaar with metal shopping halls, symbolising the abrupt transition from communism to capitalism.



*Put your phones
away.
Stand in
a perfect,
straight line,*

*shoulder to shoulder,
and look forward in total
silence for 30 seconds
without moving.*

*Feel the absolute discipline
of a communist rally.*

Now that we have seen how the authorities organized mass rallies on Parade Square, let's move into the closer surroundings of the Palace of Culture. There, we will discover an entirely different, colorful language with which the regime tried to brighten the grey daily life of the 1960s and 1970s.

NEXT STEP



Move towards the area linked with neon heritage around the Palace of Culture and Science.

Stop #9: Neon Museum, Palace of Culture and Science

Designed desire and the visual language of late socialism.

After the 1956 political thaw, the PRL authorities decided on the so-called "neonisation" of the capital. Large, colorful neon signs (designed by outstanding graphic artists and architects) were meant to give Warsaw a cosmopolitan, Western feel, but in reality, they served a different function than in the West - instead of commercial advertising (as private businesses were virtually non-existent), they served as elements of state prestige and urban information (e.g., „Cinema", „Shatterproof Glass", „Restaurant"). These light illuminations prove that the PRL was not merely grey and monumental, and that the regime knew how to use modern design to disguise economic shortages and soften its image.



Neon signs in the PRL were a unique blend of applied art and state propaganda - they were meant to brighten up reality and draw attention to places that often lacked basic goods.

Now it's your turn!

On a piece of paper, use a pen to sketch a simple, single-line contour of your own neon sign (a symbol or slogan) representing this stop. Pass your sketch around the group and guess the meanings!

Walk to the northern side of Parade Square, in front of the Museum of Modern Art (Marszałkowska 103). Here, contemporary Warsaw is writing a completely new, democratic chapter of its history.

NEXT STEP

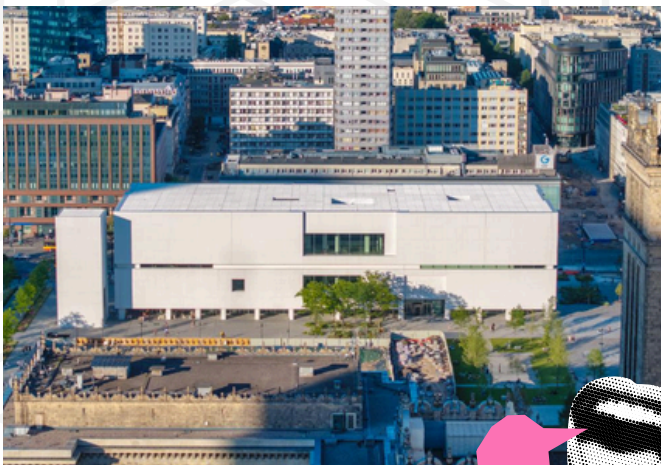


Move towards Walk to Plac Centralny and the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw the area linked with neon heritage around the Palace of Culture and Science.

Stop #10: Plac Centralny and the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw,

Reinterpretation, democratic reuse and the changing centre of the city.

Our walk ends in front of the white, minimalist building of the Museum of Modern Art (MSN), designed by Thomas Phifer, which stands in stark contrast to the grey and monumental Palace of Culture. The ongoing construction of the so-called Central Square next to it aims to bring greenery to the former concrete desert of Parade Square and return it to the citizens. This is the symbolic end of the game of appearances: a space that for decades served authoritarian power to control the masses is today becoming open and pluralistic. Warsaw has not erased its PRL heritage, but has layered new, civic meanings onto it.



Look at the clash between the Socialist Realist Palace and the modern MSN. Which PRL „scenography” on this route surprised you the most? Is contemporary Warsaw handling this difficult, imposed past well? Discuss your thoughts.

Huge congratulations! Your mission in the PRL Universe is officially complete. You have walked the entire route, flawlessly exposing the regime's „game of appearances.” You proved that you can look at the city with a critical eye - spotting hidden meanings in architecture, reading between the lines, and cleverly navigating imposed structures. Keep this mindfulness with you every day! The world around us - ads, social media, and public spaces- still tries to manipulate what we think. However, you now possess the tools to always look for the truth beneath the surface of the official message. Head out into the city with your heads held high!



This booklet was created by Fundacja Rozwoju Demokracji Lokalnej
im. Jerzego Regulskiego (FRDL) as a part of the project
Empower Youth, Explore Stories (EYES)

Contact us:

Katarzyna Doherty
katarzyna.doherty@frdl.org.pl

Małgorzata Zielińska
malgorzata.zielinska@frdl.org.pl



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