

DISCUSSION PAPER

EU - Poland Relations as a Microcosm of Europe's Right-Wing Populism Problem

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Deputy Prime Minister of Poland and Poland's ruling PiS party leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski (1st L), Prime Minister of the Czech Republic, Petr Fiala (2nd L), Prime Minister of Poland, Mateusz Morawiecki (4th L) and Prime Minister of Slovenia, Janez Jansa (3rd L) meet Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy during their visit to Kyiv on behalf of the EU Council, on March 16, 2022. (Ukrainian Presidency - Anadolu Agency)

When we look at the reactions of western countries to the Ukraine war, it would not be an exaggeration to speak about it in terms of an image of unity. Apart from the sense of unity in relations between the US and the EU, we see that various problems within the EU appear to have been put on hold for the sake of a common ideal. But have these problems really disappeared? In recent years, the EU has experienced one of its biggest crises with the migrant crisis that peaked in 2015. One of the consequences was the further spread of Eurosceptic views throughout the EU, views that had already found fertile ground in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis. New far-right parties emerged including the AfD in Germany and VoX in Spain. In France, Marine Le Pen has significantly increased her share of the vote. In the last two presidential elections she was one of the two candidates who made it to the second round and she increased her second round vote from 33 per cent (2017) to 41 per cent (2022). Just recently, a right-wing alliance, which includes the far-right Sweden Democrats Party, declared an election victory in Sweden (Crouch, 14 Sep 2022). These right-wing populist parties have positioned their respective discourses in opposition to mainstream EU policies. In some Central and Eastern European countries, we saw that those opposed to Brussels came to power more swiftly. Poland and Hungary were the leading countries in this respect, with Orban's Fidez in in Hungary and Kacnzky's PiS in Poland coming to power in 2010 and 2015, respectfully. These parties promoted political discourses that associated the European Union with problems from economic issues to migration. Tensions between Brussels on the one hand and Poland and Hungary on the other have also increased in recent years, particularly as they formed a sort of united front of opposition to the EU from with the Union itself (Euronews, 01 Apr 2021). However, the Ukraine war has changed the situation significantly.

Today we see that the alliance between Poland and Hungary has been damaged. On the one hand there is Poland, which pursues an active pro-Ukrainian stance, and Hungary's Orban, the only EU leader who has not visited Ukrainian President Zelensky (Vaski, 28 Apr 2022). Moreover, Orban has called on the EU to pursue peace talks with Russia instead of new sanctions. He has also called for Russia-US talks and and emphasized what he views as the impossibility of a Ukrainian victory (RFE/RL, 23 Jul 2022). On the contrary, Poland has pursued the most pro-Ukrainian position in the western block. It was also reflected in the statements of the country's respective prime ministers that their divergent positions vis-à-vis the Ukrainian war have complicated relations between them (Coakley, 22 Aug 2022). These developments may give the impression that the illiberal alliance has been broken. Besides, the Ukraine war clearly seems to have increased Poland's prestige in the EU. The fact that it hosts more than 5 million Ukrainian refugees, its concrete military support to Ukraine and the fact that it is one of the countries that feels the Russian threat most closely among EU member states makes Poland's position privileged among the EU countries that are positioned against the common enemy. All of this may cause hope for the future of EU-Poland relations. However, it is not difficult to say that the Polish problem continues for Brussels. The Polish side does not hesitate to remind Brussels of the efforts it has made in the context of the war in Ukraine and has expressed its expectation of a compromising stance from the EU on issues where the two sides are in disagreement. This paper will explore how understanding the EU's Poland problem can also help the EU overcome the rising tide of right-wing populism.

Less than a year ago, Poland was one of Brussel's main troublemakers. At first glance, it seems that the Ukraine war has reversed this image. In May 2022, when the EU parliament continued to cut funds[1] to Poland, the European Parliament representatives of Poland's ruling party, PiS, emphasized their country's position in the Ukraine war. PiS MEP Beata Szydło reacted to the decision to cut off funding by saying "Poland is generously helping millions of Ukrainian refugees and supporting Ukraine in its fight. How do MEPs react to this? They issue a resolution calling on the European Commission to continue blocking [recovery funds] for Poland, and even to take away other funds. Fighting against Poland is acting on behalf of Putin!" (Notes From Poland, 2022). Another example is Polish Prime Minister Morawiecki's (2022) article published on Die Welt. He begins his article by reminding the EU how right they were in their position against Russia. Then he lists his criticisms towards the EU. In summary, he says that the disproportionate power of Germany and France in the Union undermines democracy and that a path to a tyranny of the majority has been adopted by the EU. He means that if Poland could have made their voices heard before, for example about Nord Stream, today the EU would not be in this situation against Russia. In this context, the Polish PM wants to show the value of Poland's presence and voice in the EU.

The main emphasis in the PM's article is the lack of equal voice and democracy in the EU. However, it is difficult to say that Polish government shows a consistent policy with regards to these values. In this respect, there may be legitimate criticisms of Poland's policies. It may be argued in some cases that Poland is in a paradox with PiS' sharp change in immigration policy as a good example. Until the Ukraine war, Poland was a country known for its harsh immigration policy. During the 2015 migrant crisis, Poland did not accept any refugees and opposed the EU's plan to relocate migrants in the member states within a certain quota. In 2021, during the migrant crisis along the Belarussian border, it followed a harsh policy that resulted in several deaths. Today, it follows a completely different policy by opening its doors to more than 5 million Ukrainians in the influx of immigrants following the Ukraine war and is showing off its humanitarian character (Polskie Radio, 13 Aug 2022). However, the constructive role of focusing on Poland's contradictions will be very limited. The picture can only be completed by decoding Poland's rhetoric and policies and what it wants to say to Europe.

So what is the problem between the EU and Poland? It is also possible to revise this question in the context of this paper as follows: why is right-wing populism in Poland in conflict with Brussels? First of all, it should be remembered that Poland is one of the countries that receive the most financial aid from the EU and has the biggest share of EU infrastructure funds (Euronews, 2019). Parallel to this, pro-EU views are also prevalent among the Polish people. According to a survey conducted in 2019, 91% of Poles support Poland's EU membership (ibid.). So how did the Poland-EU tensions develop?

Two important developments in this context in recent years were Poland's approach toward the migrant crisis and judicial changes in positioning European law subordinate to national law. Both of these crises took place under the right-wing populist party PiS (Law and Justice Party). Before PiS it was one of the member states that did not cause today's problems (McMillan, 2017). PiS was founded in 2001 by twin brothers Jaroslaw and Lech Kaczyński. In 2015, it became the first party to rule alone since 1989. In order to understand EU-Poland tension, it would be appropriate to look at the factors that enabled PiS to become the ruling party.

The turning point, the beginning of the most important events in the recent history of Poland, was the year 1989. After 1989, there was a rapid de-communization process in the country parallel to an effort to integrate into the western liberal sphere. In 2004, it joined the EU along with 9 other countries as part of the largest expansion in EU history to date.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1989, Poland entered a transition period. This period is known by different names "but it has always signified modernisation by imitation and integration by assimilation" (Krastev and Holmes, 2019). In the 'Round Table Talks', communists, the sole holders of power at the time, and opposition (the solidarity movement) elites came together (Traynor, 1989). Adam Michnik, one of the key intellectuals in the transformation process and one of the participants in the 'Round Table Talks', uttered the following slogan; "Liberty, Fraternity, Normality" (Krastev and Holmes, 2019). By normality here, he was implying the political regime of the western world that had newly emerged as the victor of the Cold War. Krastev and Holmes (2019) say for this process; "the leading figures in these revolutions aimed at overturning one system only in order to copy another." In other words, the goal was not a new utopia, but a return to "normality."

[1] The European Court of Justice ruled that some of the changes in the Polish judicial system were unlawful and fined Poland. After Poland refused to pay, funds were skimmed from EU funds earmarked for Poland in order to pay for the fines.



Judge Igor Tuleya takes part in a protest against the ongoing judicial reforms and the illegal Disciplinary Chamber of Poland's Supreme Court in front of Krakow's Appeal Court in Krakow, Poland on January 18, 2022. On January 11, 2022, Poland's deadline to explain to the European Commission how it intends to bring its domestic judicial reforms into line with the order from the European Court of Justice (ECJ) expired. In October, 2021, the ECJ ordered Poland's conservative government to pay a 1 million euros per day fine for not suspending the disciplinary chamber of its Supreme Court." (Omar Marques - Anadolu Agency)

Poland quickly integrated into the western political regime and economy. They became a member of NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004. During this period, the Polish economy showed great development. Even in the years following the 2008 crisis, its economic growth continued unabated (Cienski, 2012). However, this whole process also had various social consequences. The lower classes did not benefit in the same way as the upper classes (Szczerbiak, 2019). At the same time, with the integration with the west and especially with the EU membership, Poland became a source of significant emigration other EU countries. As a result, Poland lost more than a million of its working population in the first 10 years of EU membership (Wiktor, 2014).

Krastev and Holmes (2019) claim that these processes form the background of the basis of PiS' power today. In other words, PiS mobilized the opposition of Polish people to the developments of the last three decades. Factors such as the top-down character of the liberal transition process after 1989 and its disregard for local culture appears as the key bases of support for the PiS government's Eurosceptic and Polish traditionalist stance today . On the other hand, Krastev and Holmes (ibid.) argue that the trauma of the emigration process triggered an anti-immigrant attitude in Poland, which PiS used extensively in its propaganda. They describe the fear of migrants in Poland as a "hysteria about non-existent immigrants about to overrun the country" and that this hysteria "represents the substitution of an illusory danger (immigration) for the real danger (depopulation and demographic collapse) that cannot speak its name"(ibid.).

In short, it is possible to summarize the process after 1989, in the context of this paper, via three developments; a speedy top-down transition to liberalism, socio-economic inequality and emigration. It is possible to see the traces of these three facts in the political strategy of the PiS government, which has ruled Poland for seven years. However, right-wing populism succeeds not by offering a prescription for these three problems, but by addressing the underlying feelings that these developments engender. It is possible to say that these three phenomena have taken away the sense of control from the Poles and that PiS has successfully painted a picture that it is taking things under control again. In other words, PiS promises to restore political subjectivity to the Poles, or rather that PiS exploits the reality of a people who have lost their political subjectivity.

In fact, one of the most important reasons for the success of PiS was its promises to those who did not receive a sufficient share of welfare in the post-communist period (Szczerbiak, 2019). It also emphasized Polish identity and 'traditional values' mainly rooted in Poland's strong Catholic heritage (Bill and Stanley, 2020). This was seen

by people who felt alienated from the political process and who had little trust in democracy as an opportunity to assert their political subjectivity (Fassoulas, 2019). As a result of this strategy, PiS came to power with the votes of the middle and lower classes (ibid.).

The year 2015, when PiS came to power, was the year when the migrant crisis erupted across Europe. Hundreds of thousands of people fleeing wars, starvation and political instability came to the borders of Europe with the hope of a new life. To ease the burden on border countries, the EU agreed on a relocation programme. Within this framework, it was envisaged that a total of 160,000 asylum seekers would be shared. During the polish elections, PiS used the migrant crisis in two ways. First, they claimed that migrants were a major threat to Poland's peace. Secondly, they argued that the relocation programme represented EU interference in Poland's internal affairs (Colyer, 2021). From this perspective, the issue of migrants was a threat to Poland from liberal cosmopolitan EU. Although it did not expect much from Poland, the EU's migration policy was seen as a source of concern. During the 2015 crisis, the number of migrants that Poland was expected to accept was only 9,000. Moreover, it did not accept single migrant (Rankin, 2 Apr 2020). However, against this, the PiS saw the migrant crisis as an opportunity and employed its conservative and Polish nationalist position vis-à-vis the migration issue to leverage some political advantage (Colyer, 2021). For instance, migration has been linked to a threat from Middle Eastern Muslims and terrorism in PiS' discourse (Narkowicz, 2018) and PM Mateusz Morawiecki has previously stated that Poland would not accept refugees from the Middle East and North Africa (Euronews, 02 Jan 2018). After a terror attack in London in March 2017, then-Polish PM Beata Szydlo said that the attack vindicated Poland's immigration policy. She stated that "The commissioner is coming to Warsaw and trying to tell us: you have to do what the EU decided, you have to take these migrants .... Two days later another terrorist attack in London occurs" (Reuters, 23 Mar 2017). In this regard, migrants and the EU's immigration policy were portrayed as a threat to Poland's civil peace. This discourse was employed both in Poland's international relations and for domestic consumption (Grosse, 2019).

Another development that opened the gap between the EU and Poland was the intervention of PiS in the Polish judicial system. PiS gradually took steps to increase its dominance over the judiciary (Gambetesa, 2019). Since their 2015 election campaign, the judicial system has been one of the main targets of the party. In particular, they have argued that the system is corrupt and ineffective (Wanat, 2021). PiS firstly wanted to control the Constitutional Tribunal, Poland's highest court. As part of this undertaking, President Andrzej Duda appointed judges close to PiS (ibid.). Moreover, a new law that decreases retirement age from 70 to 65 passed in the senate, forcing 40 per cent of judges to retire (BBC, 4 Jul 2018). In their place, the ruling party was able to appoint judges more in line with the politics of PiS. These steps were criticized by the EU. In fact, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruled that these changes in the judiciary were unlawful (Baczynska and Flowrkiewicz, 2021). Most recently, Poland's top court, which is led by Julia Przyłębska who is a personal friend of PiS' leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski, ruled that EU law has no priority over Polish law (Wanat, 2021). Then, some of the ECJ's decisions were not implemented. As a result, Poland was fined one million euros daily and refused to pay it. Therefore, the European Commission decided to deduct these fines from the EU funds that will be given to Poland (RFI, 2022). The justification for these interferences with the judiciary in PiS' discourse was the rejection of the domination of EU institutions. In this regard, the conflict found a place in a discourse of national independence. In his response in the European Commission to Ursula von der Leyen's criticisms about the above-mentioned changes, Polish PM Morawiecki said "Were we to agree to the central principle it would mean that the EU ceases to be an association of sovereign states and by fait accompli, the EU is transferred into a centrally governed European state where European institutions can force the so-called provinces to do as the central power wants. This is not what we agreed in the treaties,"(Boffey, 2021). The EU, on the other hand, emphasized that Polish ruling party's stance is an "attack on the European community of values and laws" (ibid.) and it will act in order to protect Europeans' rights in this regard (European Commission, 7 Oct 2021).

To summarize, the power of PiS was based on a strategy revolving around three issues; demands of those who did not get a sufficient share of welfare in the post-1989 period, fear of migrants, and national values and independence. The EU became the scapegoat for all three. First of all, de-communisation also meant Europeanization for Poland. For those who did not receive an equal share of prosperity as part of the new political economy, it made sense to blame Europe. The fact that Europe is also a source of prosperity should be considered an integral part of this picture and the continuing EU support of the Polish people should be interpreted within this framework. Secondly, the migrant crisis that peaked in 2015 created a climate of fear for Poles. According to Krastev and Holmes (2019), concerns about demographic collapse as a result of emigration were reinforced by a fear that migrants would take over the country. Thirdly, national values and independence most

often mean the regression of EU institutions' authority in Poland. Both the opposition to the EU's relocation programme and the rejection of the priority of EU law over Polish law can be understood in this context.

However, the above-mentioned perspective to understanding PiS' rule is not the only explanation for the current situation. Elzbieta Korolzcuk (2019) in her article published on the LSE blog, criticizes Krastev and Holmes (2019) who understood populist trends in Poland in their local context and described it as the collapse of the liberalization project. Korolzcuk's main criticism is that this wave of populism is a global problem and not unique to eastern Europe or Poland. She says we cannot overlook the fact that there are "efforts to globalize the ultraconservative agenda" in western countries' populist circles. Undoubtedly, this point has a meaningful side. Populist leaders watch each other's back in the international arena. Another alternative explanation of Poland's right-wing populism is based on characteristics of Poles. For instances, Peter Fassoulas, the Secretary General of European Movement International, interprets the 2019 election victory of PiS as an illustration of the disbelief of Poles in democracy and their adherence to their traditions (Fassoulas, 2019). He concludes his article by stating that "we must also understand the attitudes that guide Polish citizens in their political views". However this "understanding" is referring to understanding the national characteristics of Poles, as if historical context has played no role in its formulation. This kind of stereotyping would not only be a very superficial interpretation but also, I argue, such views are also part of the problem as they serve to underestimate important historical processes that Poles have been subjected to.

In other words, two alternative explanations for populism in Poland are the impact of global right-wing populism and an essentialist reading of the Polish people. Both have their own merits, however, what is common in both readings is that both ignore the social and political processes that Poles experienced in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Poles' journey to "normality", to an imitation of western liberalism after 1989 brought them to a point where their sense of being in control of their own destiny had disappeared. The PiS government, on the other hand, has found ways to address this sentiment. Or, from another point of view, PiS is adept at interpreting recent history in this way and addressing Poles with that interpretation. In this regard, prominent names of the party have chosen "old-new elites" as the enemy. These "old-new elites" were both remnants of communism and liberal-left elites that monopolized political power after 1989 (Bill, 2022). One way or another, it offers them political subjectivity and representation. Seeing this phenomenon as a product of a global trend or national characteristics rather than in its own particular history would be to insist on rejecting the requested subjectivity. Instead, the desire for political subjectivity can be satisfied first and foremost through deep historical understanding. Unless this is done, populists will continue to exploit this gap to their benefit. Michal Szuldrzynski, from Rzeczpospolita, a mainstream Polish newspaper, interprets PiS' and Kaczynski's success by the fact that "many people felt we had lost our identity in this process, and Kaczynski understood this." The implication here is that those who want to stave off the populist wave must understand what Kaczynski understood. This should not entail crafting an alternative identity politics but rather offering real world solutions to the socio-economic problems that people who have historically voted for PiS have experienced.

Democracy, first and foremost, is about people having a voice and representation in politics and the first step for representation is the recognition of a person, group or people. This does not mean that a desire for political representation is not vulnerable to manipulation, however, ignoring the desire for true political representation serves as a kind of cyclical re-enforcement of viewpoints that are easily exploitable by populist politics.

Last but not least, Poles, who demand their political subjectivity in different ways after a technocratic transition period, can also open the door for the EU to confront its rising problem of right-wing populism. Although each country should be understood within itself, there are also common historical processes at play. Poland's experience might seem more dramatic, however, many other European countries also experienced a period of neo-liberalization. It is seen that the lower classes in the neoliberal order and the masses who can make their voices less heard prefer far-right or populist parties in many places (Oesch, 2008). In other words, the EU's confrontation with the Polish problem will mean that it will also face its own populism problem.

On the other hand, the unity, which is thought to have emerged with the Ukraine war, seems misleading. It remains a distinct possibility that populist politicians will find more space in a future where international tensions continue to rise. Although it may seem speculative today, there are even arguments about the possibility of Poland strengthening a separate eastern European bloc outside the EU, together with Ukraine (Kulsz and Wigura, 2022). Another important point that should be touched is right-wing populist movements' relations with Russia. Many

of these parties have strong relations with Russia. For example, France's Marine le Pen took more than 10 million euros in loans from Kremlin-linked banks for her 2014 presidential campaign (Gatehouse, 03 Apr 2017). She also stated that the annexation of Crimea by Russia is legitimate (Batchelor, 03 Jan 2017). Germany's far-right party AfD (Alternative for Germany) has been also criticized for their pro-Russia stance. Party leader Alice Weidel has criticized the western block and NATO for what she has termed its 'incitement' with regards to the war in Ukraine (RT, 08 Aug 2022). Matteo Salvini, an Italian right wing populist leader, is also known for his strong connections with Russia. In an interview with German broadcaster DW, Russia expert Anton Shekhovstov stated that the "Kremlin needs allies in the west" and far-right populist parties are the best address for this need (2019, May 20). In the context of a protracted war and energy crisis, the problem of far-right populism will likely become even more challenging for Europe. In short, it is doubtful how realistic the image of power given by the unity against Russia is. Against the rising tide of right-wing populism, the EU can start with a self-critical assessment of today's political economy. Understanding the Polish case, which did not result in a pro-Russian government, would be an appropriate point to start. Another point that should not be forgotten is that although Russia supports many of the right-wing populist movements in Europe, the source of the problem is that people who feel outside the system need to seek representation in one way or another. In the neoliberal order, far-right parties often meet this need for political subjectivity that other political actors do not.

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