Whose Poland Is It To Be? PiS and the Struggle Between Monism and Pluralism

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Introduction

Three years to the day since Poland’s landmark semi-free elections of 4 June 1989, and a mere nine months after the first fully-free elections, prime minister Jan Olszewski gave an emotional speech on the occasion of the ousting of his short-lived government. An unstable right-wing coalition had fallen after conflicts amongst Poland’s new political elite over transition to democracy and de-communisation culminated in the intrigue and controversy of the notorious ‘night shift’ (nocna zmiana), a turbulent evening parliamentary session that concluded with a vote of no confidence. While much of Olszewski’s speech concerned the immediate circumstances of the government’s downfall, the most striking section would resonate for years to come.

From today onwards the stake in this game is not simply the question of which government will be able to execute the budget to the end of the year; at stake is something more, a certain image of Poland: what sort of Poland it is to be. To put it another way, whose Poland is it to be? (Olszewski 1992).

For Olszewski and his supporters, these questions were inseparable. If Poland were to be a genuinely democratic post-communist polity, then it was crucial to resolve the question of where the locus of political authority lay and in whose name that authority was exercised. At one level, this was primarily a political consideration: could Poland really be said to have achieved transition to democracy for as long as former communists remained in positions of political authority? However, with transition not only a matter of the construction of political institutions but also the (re)building of a fully sovereign ‘nation’ and the creation of a free market economy,
Olszewski’s words had a broader resonance. In whose interests was economic transition working? Whose identities and values were being privileged by the nascent regime, and whose were under threat?

Nearly three decades on, Polish politics is still dominated by these ‘metapolitical’ questions. While many of the decisions to be taken during the period of transition were the stuff of ‘ordinary’ politics, transition also raised higher-order questions about the very legitimacy of political actors and the proper ambit of politics itself. Their lack of resolution is one of the major causes of the fundamental cleavage in Polish party politics. If from 2007 to 2015 Poland was governed by parties which attempted to move beyond Olszewski’s questions by ignoring them, from 2015 onwards the dispute returned with redoubled vigour. The electoral success of Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) in 2015 and the legal and institutional conflicts subsequently provoked by its government reflected the latent, persistent quality of this cleavage.

It would be tempting to attribute PiS’s success to the contemporaneous ‘populist wave’ and the particular susceptibility of young democracies to subversion. Yet to understand what has happened in Poland since 2015, it is not sufficient to fall back on distinctions between populist and non-populist parties and the different logics of action that those two terms imply. In this article, we argue that Polish politics has been and continues to be shaped by a clash between monism and pluralism that has not always functioned in strict accordance with the populist / non-populist binary. Rhetorical commitment to liberal-democratic pluralism in theory has often devolved into a benignly neglectful monism in the form of technocratic government and the denial of credible alternative paths of development. Since 2015, PiS has re-politicised many of
these areas of policy, but its executive aggrandisement and exclusionist nativism have instantiated new forms of monism.

We begin with a discussion of the complex development and legacy of the ‘liberal consensus’ that held sway at the outset of transition to democracy. This background helps to clarify why the questions Olszewski asked in 1992 continue to be relevant a quarter-century on. We then discuss the intentions, impact and outcomes of the post-2015 PiS government across the three key spheres of political-institutional, economic, and cultural change. Finally, we explain how PiS’s actions across each of these spheres – and the outcomes those actions produced – have been consistent with an agenda extending far beyond the ordinary politics of contestation.

**Technocratic monism and populist backlash: the ‘liberal consensus’ and its legacy**

After 1989, liberalism became ‘an obligatory syntax of political thought’ (Crăiuţu, cited in Trenčesyňi et al. 2018, 209). For many, this was simply the logical corollary of a rejection of the preceding system: liberalism was ‘inverted Marxism’ (Ackerman, cited in Szacki 1995, 6); less an ideology, more just the politics of normality. Transition to the market was desirable because it was not the command economy. Transition to democracy was desirable because it was not the one-party state. Integration with Western political and economic structures was desirable because it was not the Warsaw Pact. Individual liberties and a free civil society were desirable because they were not censorship, invigilation and state-controlled forms of civic engagement.

At the level of intellectual debates, the liberal consensus was far from the only game in town at the outset of transition: other conceptions of democracy included a reformed socialism and direct democracy (Mark et al. 2019, 110) as well as the ideas of a current of pro-capitalist reformers.
who, while not rejecting democracy, evinced scepticism about its immediate benefits (Dzielski 1995, 286–289). Yet if those who hoped for a decisive shift to the market under authoritarian auspices were rapidly overtaken by events, hopes for more bottom-up forms of democracy were consciously stymied by political elites whose insistence on representative democracy and technocratic management of the complex and overlapping processes of transition was well captured in transition-era Finance Minister Leszek Balcerowicz’s honest disdain for the ‘naive belief … that things can be explained to people’ (Torańska 1994, 4).

Three aspects of the liberal consensus can be adumbrated: economic, characterised by a belief in the superiority of the free market and in the economic rationality of the individual; civic, characterised by an emphasis on the free and active participation of individuals in civil society and the political process; and cultural, characterised by openness and cultural plurality (Trenčsényi et al. 2018, 193). Progression toward the realisation of this model was the teleology of ‘normality’ in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe. However, liberalism’s hegemonic generality militated against its expression as an ideology in the political platforms of specific political parties (Dawson and Hanley 2016, 21), where the three aspects of the liberal consensus often failed to coincide.

As Polish sociologist Jerzy Szacki observed during the early years of transition, liberalism as a political project was weakened by several factors. Poland’s history as a nation without a state compelled Poles ‘to pay special attention to moral unity’ and to reject divisions and conflicts within society as threats to vital national interests. While Western liberalism was rooted in political, class, ethnic and moral heterogeneity, the homogeneity of contemporary Poland had created a heavily asymmetrical relationship between the dominant group and those who were at
best tolerated, rather than regarded as moral equals. This was echoed in – and reinforced by –
what Szacki characterised as an archaic understanding of democracy, according a special status
to the will of the majority and rejecting constraints on those with a mandate to articulate it
(Szacki 1995, 203–4).

Liberalism’s success as a set of broad, all-encompassing predicates for ‘normalisation’ rendered
it increasingly nugatory as a policy platform for particular parties. Yet, as the rise of parties and
movements which more competently organised anti-liberal attitudes began to pose a challenge to
the hegemony of liberal ideas, liberalism became associated with a strain of ‘moderation’ that
ran across several different ideological groups of the political mainstream. Although this ethos
was not always realised in practice, its essence inhered in the ‘common moral and prudential
commitment’ to protecting the constitution, defending liberty against its opponents, and
searching for solutions to political questions that are consensualist and ‘healing’ in character

Liberal parties in Poland initially followed this path. In the early 1990s, the political programmes
of the Liberal-Democratic Congress (Kongres Liberalno-Demokratyczny, KLD) and the Freedom
Union (Unia Wolności, UW) reflected their founders’ explicit intellectual commitments to the
ideology of liberalism as well as the politics of normalisation. Both parties would prove short-
lived but contributed both ideas and personnel to the emergence of Civic Platform (Platforma
Obywatelska, PO), which would become – as it remains – one of Poland’s two major parties.
Initially, PO’s policy platform bore the imprint of the party’s liberal origins, but after coming to
power in 2007 it increasingly shifted toward the position captured in Crăiuțu’s conception of
moderation, a technocratic and conflict-avoiding managerialism that was dubbed the ‘warm

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water in the tap’ approach to politics.\textsuperscript{1} For Donald Tusk, PO’s leader and prime minister from 2007 to 2014, a ‘moderate approach to differences and [commitment to] defusing conflicts’ became an ideal mode of government that smoothed away the rough edges of ideology (Nowicki 2007), although in practice his government did not always eschew conflict, particularly with respect to political and personal relationships with PiS.

When the backlash came, it was in response both to the ideological principles of liberalism and to the metapolitics of moderation, which could easily be represented as an excuse for mediocrity. The ideas behind the backlash were not new. Critical voices had persisted in the interstices of a politics otherwise dominated by the liberal consensus. From 2001 onward the historical divide between post-Solidarity and post-communist forces that had generated coalitions of government and opposition began to erode. Two insurgent parties, the agrarian-populist Self-Defence (Samoobrona, SRP) and the radical right League of Polish Families (Liga Polskich Rodzin, LPR), attacked the governing ideas and the personnel of the post-communist transition, with the conservative, anti-communist PiS also becoming increasingly radical in its rhetoric, particularly after the collapse of the ill-fated coalition government of these three parties in 2007.

Outside parliament, Poland’s emergent civil society gave rise to groups that rejected the prevalent mode of politics. On the left, Political Critique (Krytyka Polityczna) argued for the revitalisation of politics as a pluralistic conflict of competing interests rather than tepid consensus. Yet, while the left would eventually revive in 2019, for much of the period after 2001

\textsuperscript{1} The term ‘warm water in the tap’ (ciepła woda w kranie) gained currency during the period of coalition government between PO and the conservative agrarian Polish People’s Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, PSL). While the government and its supporters intended it to connote the kind of steady and competent management they felt the electorate expected (you turn the tap on in the morning, and you can be sure warm water will flow out), the opposition used the term pejoratively to refer to a perceived lack of ambition and vision on the government’s part.
the right had a more substantial impact upon the terms of political debate. From the beginning of
transition, conservative groups and social movements had chafed at liberalism’s assumption of
its natural superiority. While these voices were disparate, isolated and largely ineffectual during
the 1990s, over the next decade they became increasingly influential, particularly after the
economic crisis of 2008. Although this crisis did not greatly affect Poland in economic terms, the
worldwide damage it inflicted on liberals’ self-confidence and the credibility of their ideas (Mark
et al. 2019, 276) helped forge an ideological opportunity structure for opponents of liberalism.¹

Conservative Polish intellectuals who had railed against ‘imitative modernisation’ (Krasnodębski
2006; Musiał 2013) and the allegedly homogenising, anti-pluralistic tendencies of liberal
democracy (Legutko, cited in Trenčsényi et al. 2018, 282) found their ideas gaining traction with
the electorate. On the economic front, the legacy of liberalism was increasingly tainted by ‘rising
social inequality, pervasive corruption, and the morally arbitrary redistribution of public property
into the hands of a few’ (Krastev and Holmes 2019, 21). On the cultural front, the refusal of
imitative modernisation manifested itself in an assertion of Central and Eastern Europe’s role as
the defender of true European values, ‘protect[ing] whiteness, Christianity, and traditional gender
roles against extra-European migrants and a decadent West’ (Mark et al. 2019, 267). On the
political front, the retreat of liberals into bland technocracy fired calls for a re-politicisation of
public life and the renaissance of moral dispute (Trenčsényi et al. 2018, 279–80), and a
repatriation of sovereignty from the EU to sovereign nations (Mark et al. 2019, 276).

¹ A similar example can be found in Hungary, where Fidesz’s return to power amid the post-2008 crisis facilitated the
revival of a dormant conservative backlash against liberalism (Buzogány and Varga 2019, 822). Indeed, many of
the ideas and practices generated within this knowledge regime were subsequently diffused to Poland, where many
conservatives received Fidesz leader Viktor Orban as a model to be emulated.
If liberalism had largely failed to generate a coherent and long-lasting set of parties across the region, the component parts of the anti-liberal critique dovetailed perfectly into an agenda for change. At the metapolitical level, PiS challenges the hegemony of an anti-pluralistic ‘mono-power’ that, they assert, has removed certain questions from the sphere of real political contestation. The party presents itself as the only challenger to this monistic orthodoxy, repoliticising questions of the appropriate cultural model for Polish society and of the state’s role in the economy. At the political level, this manifests itself in an agenda that marries nativism and cultural conservatism with redistributive policies aimed at correcting social inequalities through state action, and a thoroughgoing reform of Poland’s political-institutional architecture. This policy agenda chimes with the culturally conservative and economically interventionist values of PiS’s core electorate (Czerniak, Graca-Gelert, and Łuczyn 2018, 30–31; Sadura and Sierakowski 2019, 38).

PiS’s ‘thick ideological’ political agenda is often articulated through the ‘thin-ideological’ (Stanley 2008) prism of a populist narrative which explains post-communist politics as a betrayal of ‘the nation’ (naród) – or ordinary, ‘authentic’ Poles – by ‘false’ domestic elites supposedly in league with foreign interests. In the cultural sphere, this narrative pertains to the alleged dangers of multiculturalism, migrants from the Muslim world, and so-called ‘LGBT’ and ‘gender’ ideologies. In the economic sphere, the party promotes interpretations of an unjust post-1989 transformation dictated by western neoliberalism, and the need to support those supposedly excluded from the benefits of the transition. According to this narrative, the dominance of

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3 In this sense, PiS’s rhetoric coheres well with one of the key pillars of populism in Cas Mudde’s definition of it as a response to ‘the exclusion of important political issues from the political agenda’ and a call for their ‘repoliticisation’ (Mudde 2016, 58).
unfamiliar cosmopolitan values, the failure of elites equitably to distribute the fruits of economic
growth, and the colonisation of political institutions by deracinated and inauthentic elites means
that ‘the average Pole still cannot feel at home in Poland’ (Sawczuk 2018, 12).

The anti-liberal backlash was not inevitable; the role of specific political actors in determining
the path taken in Poland since 2015 should not be understated. However, the opportunity
structure for the emergence of the backlash was partly the legacy of the hasty adoption of a
largely imitative liberal consensus as the politics of ‘normality’. The depoliticisation of the
public sphere as a result of tranquil, efficient technocratic governance is inimical to the
pluralistic interplay of ideologies on which politics depends. As a consequence, contestation has
moved to the metapolitical sphere, where political battles are still fought not only over who has
the best ideas, but over who has the right to have ideas at all.

‘We want a new state’: political-institutional change

One of the most difficult tasks Poland faced after the end of communism was the reform of the
country’s mono-centric political institutions. Four and a half decades of communism had
bequeathed a one-party system characterised by the dominance of the Polish United Workers’
Party (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza, PZPR) over all other key institutions: the
judiciary, the legislature, the media, and local government. Amid significant uncertainty about
the prospects for transition to democracy in early 1989, the Round Table discussions between the
PZPR and representatives of opposition movements took place in accordance with principles of
limited pluralism, gradualism, and the avoidance of conflict (Kemp-Welch 2008, 394–5).
The successive collapse of communist regimes across the region in 1989 and 1990 led to calls for the ‘acceleration’ (przyspieszenie) of transition to democracy and the abandonment of consensus-oriented gradualism. Nevertheless, the formal structures of Poland’s Third Republic took some time to emerge. The ‘Small Constitution’ (Mała Konstytucja) of 1992 reorganised the relationships between the government and parliament, but it would take until 1997 for a full constitution to be agreed upon.

The tardy character of political-institutional transition in Poland became a focal point of contestation in the 1990s. The early years of transition brought to the fore ideological differences among members of the opposition that predated the fall of communism. These differences were exacerbated by competing evaluations of the merits of the Round Table, mutual suspicion and hostility between various cliques, and jostling for position and influence in a rapidly changing sphere of political possibilities. While the historically-rooted ‘regime divide’ between former communists and oppositionists initially had the most influence on government formation, it was the ‘transition divide’ that would ultimately have the more significant impact on Polish politics.

In the early 1990s, Jarosław Kaczyński had already developed a theory of the ‘subcutaneous sense’ of the Round Table talks: beneath the discussion of political reforms lay a tacit compact between the negotiating parties that the nomenklatura would surrender exclusive political power for the guarantee that they could pursue their economic interests (Torańska 1994, 91). Kaczyński viewed the 1997 Constitution as the institutional expression of this agreement, entrenching a self-reproducing ‘mono-power’ in the political-institutional system and systematically excluding and delegitimising alternative political actors (Kaczyński 2006b, 2016, 109).
In an interview conducted during PiS’s first period in government, Kaczyński was explicit about his party’s intention to overturn Poland’s new constitutional settlement, averring that ‘[we want] a new state. We don’t want revolutionary tribunals, but we want new institutions’. More important than matters of policy was the goal of ‘break[ing] apart the system [układ] which is directing Poland’s political, economic, and, in a certain sense, social life’ (Karnowski and Zaremba 2006, 22). PiS’s first attempts to achieve this goal were repelled by the Constitutional Tribunal, and the sense that the system had colluded to bring down the unstable PiS-SRP-LPR government served to intensify Kaczyński’s enmity toward it (Stanley 2016). While Kaczyński described himself as ‘not from that group’ who hold an honest belief in the wisdom of the people (Nowak 2013, 4931), he recognised the uses of populism as a rhetoric and strategy of polarisation and confrontation. During PiS’s period in opposition, the party developed and strengthened its claims to represent the interests of ‘real Poles’ against the designs of an inauthentic and usurping elite, particularly after the Smoleńsk air disaster of April 2010, an event which allowed it to draw connections between the reality of state incapacity and the unfalsifiable ruminations of the conspiracy theorist.

On PiS’s return to power in 2015, it immediately set about implementing its plan. The absence of a constitutional majority might theoretically have prevented the enactment of the changes PiS intended. Yet it circumvented this inconvenience by employing a strategy of executive decisionism, avoiding consequences for breaking and bending the law by disempowering or politicising the institutions that would otherwise hold the executive to account. This process began with the paralysing and capturing of the Constitutional Tribunal during 2015-2016 through the appointment of ‘quasi-judges’ in the place of legally-elected judges, the imposition of an
illegally-appointed Tribunal president, and the use of legislation on the functioning of the Tribunal to impede its capacity to resist these changes (Sadurski 2019, 64–66).

The capture of the Constitutional Tribunal facilitated the purging and politicisation of other institutions by removing de facto constitutional control over the actions of the government. PiS’s next move was to attempt to purge and establish control over the judiciary. To achieve this, it passed legislation to lower the retirement age for judges, removing from the Supreme Court several critical justices who had previously signalled their intention to resist PiS’s plans.4 By amending the law on the National Council for the Judiciary (Krajowa Rada Sądownicza, KRS) PiS made it possible for the legislature – and by extension, the executive majority – to control almost all appointments to the body responsible for appointing and disciplining judges. It also founded a new Disciplinary Chamber of the Supreme Court whose members are appointed by the president of Poland following their approval by the KRS. This system created a mechanism for the government to exert control over the disciplining of judges.

PiS also established a firm hold over other key institutions of scrutiny and control. While public media had always been susceptible to political interference, under PiS it was transformed into an outright instrument of propaganda. The means by which public media was captured is characteristic of PiS’s general approach to institutions. Prior to 2016, the appointment of chairpersons of public media and members of supervisory or management boards was the statutory prerogative of the National Council of Broadcasting and Television (Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji, KRRiT), a constitutional organ charged with ‘safeguard[ing] the public interest regarding radio broadcasting and television’ (Art. 213.2, Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej

4 Following an adverse preliminary ruling by the European Court of Justice, PiS eventually backed down on the purging of judges, but other aspects of the changes were left intact.
PiS transferred these powers to a new parallel institution, the Council of National Media (Rada Mediów Narodowych, RMN), thereby giving a body created by statute a more important role in regulating public media than its constitutional equivalent. In similar fashion, the existing flaws of parliament were amplified rather than repaired, with the opposition entirely marginalised and bills passed with the bare minimum of social consultation and legislative scrutiny regardless of the absence of any need for haste (Sadurski 2019, 133–4). This ‘fast-track’ approach to legislation was often used as an ad hoc problem-solving measure, with bills of major consequence passed to achieve a discrete short-term goal rather than to realise a long-term strategy of reform.5

The consequences of these actions were significant. There were indeed no ‘revolutionary tribunals’ (although the new disciplinary judicial bodies were used in arbitrary and repressive fashion), yet the new institutions Kaczyński had promised were not built or operated in a spirit of pluralism but in accordance with the interests of the governing majority. Measures of the quality of democracy fell to levels not seen since the semi-democratic first years of transition (Coppedge et al. 2019). Attempts by the European Union to intervene were rebuffed, with President Andrzej Duda likening the organisation to a new iteration of the foreign powers that have occupied and controlled Poland at various points in its recent history (Duda, in Deutsche Welle 2018).

If PiS saw the political-institutional system of the Third Republic as insufficiently pluralistic, its attempts to address this resulted not in more diversity of thought and action, but in the emergence of an arbitrary and monistic political system: a mono-power of PiS’s own. The

5 A striking example of this approach occurred during PiS’s attempts to purge the Supreme Court: when PiS realised that the nomination of a new chief justice would be delayed by the blocking tactics of ‘recalcitrant’ judges on the court, it duly passed an amendment that decreased the number of judges needed to propose a new slate of candidates.
disappearance of PiS’s earlier project for a new constitution was symptomatic of the new mode of governance. President Duda attempted to revive the idea of a new constitutional convention which would result in a re-founding of the state on the 100th anniversary of Poland regaining independence in 1918. However, this idea foundered amid general indifference from PiS, which had discovered its objectives were better served by preserving a sphere of unrestrained executive decisionism instead of tying itself to the mast of a new legal order.

‘A Polish model of the welfare state’: conservative redistributionism

In the 2019 election campaign, the dominant plank of PiS’s policy platform was its social spending programmes. Promises to defend traditional values were also important for the mobilisation of the party’s base of conservative voters. However, messages of prosperity and welfare constituted its banner promises, calculated to appeal to the widest spectrum of voters. Notably, party leaders, especially Kaczyński himself, began to use an entirely new term, not previously in common use within their discourse: the ‘welfare state’ (państwo dobrobytu). PiS’s new official party programme incorporated this term into its title: ‘A Polish model of the welfare state’ (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość 2019). In various campaign speeches, Kaczyński defined this concept as a set of mechanisms to reduce social inequality in opposition to the ‘social Darwinism’ of ‘neoliberalism’ (Business Insider 2019; Polska Agencja Prasowa 2019). At the same time, he strongly emphasized the ‘Polish’ nature of the model. In this way, he underlined the concurrent importance of traditional values, differentiating the policy from western social democratic models that might have been unattractive to many conservative voters.6

6 Though ruling coalition partner and deputy prime minister Jarosław Gowin has referred to PiS’s economic policies as a form of ‘social democracy’ (Rzeczpospolita 2019b).
The party’s policy document laid out a ‘welfare state’ based above all on support for the traditional institution of the family through the flagship ‘500 +’ child benefit programme. From its introduction in 2015, this programme initially acted as a quasi-redistributive mechanism, as it was means-tested for the first child. In 2019, shortly before the elections, PiS made the programme universal for all children. The new party agenda also emphasised the lowering of the retirement age, raising of the minimum wage, increases to retirement and disability pensions, free medicines for seniors, and the elimination of income tax for workers under the age of 25. The party has promised to impose further increases of the minimum wage to almost twice its current level within five years.

PiS has presented its pivot to redistribution as one of the ways it has sought to break the hegemony of the ‘mono-power’. According to this narrative, all other major political forces – both post-Solidarity and post-communist – have acted against the fundamental interests of the ‘nation’ or ‘ordinary Poles’ in the economic sphere since 1989. In accordance with the predicates of a neoliberal model of economic development, they have sold the ‘family jewels’ of the national economy to foreigners, turned the country into a ‘colonised’ reservoir of cheap labour for exploitation, and presided over an unjust transformation from which most ordinary people have not benefited (Lis 2017; Prawo i Sprawiedliwość 2019). In response, PiS emphasizes the importance of national capital, social equality, and equitable development across the country’s regions. In his policy statement speech after the 2019 elections, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki repeatedly referred to the ‘welfare state’ and the need to address both global and domestic inequality (Morawiecki 2019). He underlined his government’s aim to close the gap between Poland and more developed countries, but also between different regions and sections of Polish society. As evidence of success, Morawiecki cited Poland’s high growth rate in
comparison with the Eurozone and a fall in the Gini index placing inequality in the country
below that of Denmark, Germany, Italy, France, and the United Kingdom.

The success and popularity of PiS’s social programmes (Bożewicz 2019a; Roguska 2019) –
aided by favourable macroeconomic conditions – have changed the face of Polish politics. All
the major parties went to the 2019 elections promising social spending. Even the liberal-centrist
coalition of PO and Modern (Nowoczesna) not only pledged to retain PiS’s programmes, but also
added its own packet of social promises (Koalicja Obywatelska 2019). These parties had
previously been associated with a less generous economic liberalism. Yet the new climate
established by the incumbent government seemed to make it impossible for them to go to voters
without at least guaranteeing PiS’s new status quo. In short, social spending has become the new
norm in Polish politics.

Though PiS has presented its ‘good change’ as revolutionary, the party’s approach is not entirely
novel. Governments led by the post-communist Democratic Left Alliance (Sojusz Lewicy
Demokratycznej, SLD) in 1993-1997 and 2001-2005 claimed to be cushioning the blow of
liberalising reforms to the Polish economy – for instance, by slowing the pace of privatisation,
especially in its first term (Dudek 2016, 323). In this perspective, PiS’s rise to power in 2015 can
be seen as a continuation of a wider pattern of post-1989 oscillations in Polish politics between
more and less economically liberal governments. Just as SLD twice followed ostensibly more
reformist post-Solidarity governments, PiS has followed two terms of economically-liberal PO
with what will soon be two terms of its statist approach.\(^7\) Nevertheless, PiS’s programme

\(^7\) In fact, SLD also delivered a partially ‘neoliberal’ agenda, especially in its second term, restricted by the fiscal
demands of the EU accession process. Conversely, the ‘reformist’ AWS-UW post-Solidarity coalition government
of 1997-2000 was riven by conflicts over how far the reforms should go. Nevertheless, at least in terms of election
campaign rhetoric, a clear oscillation between a bolder reformist agenda and an anti-reformist backlash was visible.
represents a genuinely new development and a radicalisation of the earlier pattern to the extent that more straitened economic circumstances restricted the capacity of earlier governments to introduce redistributive measures. PiS’s current policy of significant cash payments is indeed unprecedented, leading many voters to feel empowered in ways they had not experienced under previous governments (Gduła 2017, 3; Sadura and Sierakowski 2019, 9–11). Less ideologically-committed voters have noted that nepotism, cronyism, waste and mismanagement have not disappeared from public institutions under PiS. Yet the apparent improvement in their own circumstances has convinced many to vote for the party in spite of these ‘pathologies’ (Sadura and Sierakowski 2019, 11).

PiS’s success is attributable not to its redistributive policies alone, but rather to a combination of these policies with cultural conservatism. In a society in which most people still live outside those major urban centres that have been the most powerful engines of growth and the most receptive environments for progressive values, this combination speaks to the average voter (Badora 2015). PiS has used this dual focus to address underlying social dissatisfactions springing from the supposed injustices of the post-1989 transformation – what David Ost has called ‘the defeat of Solidarity’ (Ost 2005). According to Ost’s interpretation, a neoliberal consensus in Warsaw meant there was no political channel for the expression of social anger rooted in the economic upheaval of the transition. All parties were essentially committed to the same course of privatisation and the marginalisation of organised labour, leading to growing inequality and poverty. In the absence of political conduits for class conflicts, this anger was redirected in non-economic directions, expressing itself in exclusionary visions of national identity, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality. Therefore, Ost describes the rise of the Polish right – including the extreme right – in the early 2000s as a ‘capturing’ or diverting of economic anger.
for non-economic purposes (Ost 2005, 36). In short, economic problems could only find cultural responses.

Ost’s arguments overlook the autonomous significance of culture. Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart have argued convincingly that the ‘cultural backlash’ against liberalism is not merely the ideological superstructure to a base of economic disaffection, but rather an independent source of populism’s appeal (Norris and Inglehart 2019). Nevertheless, Ost’s point about the depoliticisation of class or economic questions in certain phases of post-1989 Polish history remains valid. Since 2015, PiS has effectively repoliticised these economic questions, while still continuing to mobilise the same non-economic, cultural arguments. In fact, the economic and cultural dimensions are not contradictory, but rather mutually reinforcing. The party refers consistently to a betrayed legacy of Solidarity in both domains, claiming to restore what it presents as the movement’s dual emphasis on national identity and social solidarity.

PiS’s repoliticisation of specifically economic questions remains cautious, generally avoiding any explicitly ‘left-wing’ vocabulary of class. However, one might still interpret its politics fundamentally as the representation of the interests of non-urban, less-educated, lower-wage-earning sectors of Polish society against urban, better-educated, higher-wage-earning sectors. This division is clearly visible in exit polls from the 2019 elections (Danielewski and Ambroziak 2019; Lipiński 2019). Above all, PiS has enacted a symbolic ‘redistribution of dignity’ or social prestige, seeking to empower – both economically and culturally – sections of the electorate that have often felt ignored by mainstream Polish politics since 1989 (Smolar 2019). PiS has broken the ‘mono-power’ of the neoliberal consensus, but in doing so it has entrenched other anti-pluralist narratives, especially in the cultural sphere.
Cultural backlash: defending traditional values

In cultural terms, PiS has ridden a rightward turn, strengthened this turn, and validated an underlying social conservativism that was always present in Poland. In place of supposedly ‘imitative’ tendencies, PiS has fostered national self-assertion against ‘western’ cultural trends. Kaczyński has repeatedly referred to Poland as an ‘island of freedom’, resisting what he presents as repressive ‘political correctness’ from the west. His party promises to defend Poland from external and internal threats to traditional identity and a value system closely tied to Catholicism. This defence also includes the promotion of ‘Polish’ interpretations of twentieth-century history – what Prime Minister Morawiecki has called ‘our truth about the past’ – against alleged attempts by hostile external powers and their domestic agents to shift responsibility for German crimes onto Poland (Polsat News 2018).

Once again, the party presents its vision as a shattering of the orthodoxy of the post-1989 ‘monopo-

larity’ – in this case, the domestic elite’s mere ‘aping’ of western cultural trends in betrayal of ‘authentic’ Polish identity (Kaczyński 2011, 41; Prawo i Sprawiedliwość 2014, 17). In practice, this approach has led to the rhetorical establishment of a new monism, as the ruling party questions or dismisses the morality or ‘Polishness’ of those who would defend alternative models of identity. For instance, Kaczyński has repeatedly insisted that the Catholic Church is the only legitimate source of moral values in Poland, arguing that outside the Church there can only be a ‘nihilism’ that threatens the foundations of the Polish state (Rzeczpospolita 2019c).

In his policy statement speech after the 2019 elections, Prime Minister Morawiecki captured this anti-pluralist principle in theoretical terms: ‘We do not agree to allow exceptions to define the norm’ (Morawiecki 2019). The specific context here was alleged threats to the family as the
‘bastion of the whole of Poland’. More generally, ‘normality’ as an overarching term for a
singular political, economic and cultural path is the key motif throughout the speech. At first, this
vague term is supposed to unite ‘all political forces’. Yet the prime minister goes on to define
‘Polishness’ as a ‘normality’ from which certain groups and ideas are implicitly excluded. The
‘norm’ does not admit ‘exceptions’. Moreover, the exceptions are actively dangerous to the
norm. In these sections of his speech, the prime minister alludes to the main cultural threats
delineated by PiS during the preceding election campaign: the so-called ‘ideologies’ of LGBT

During the campaign, PiS’s warnings to the electorate focused above all on the LGBT ‘threat’. In
multiple public speeches, interviews, and social media posts, party members promised to defend
Poles from this alleged danger. The public media – which are controlled by party loyalists –
played an important part in this campaign, running multiple stories presenting LGBT rights
campaigners in a highly negative light. A film aired on public television a few days before the
election depicting activists as ‘invaders’ intent on attacking religion, giving pornography to
children, and also as beholden to foreign interests and funders (TVP Info 2019a). High-ranking
members of the Catholic Church joined the negative campaign, repeatedly positing an existential
threat to the national community and its values. Archbishop of Kraków Marek Jędraszewski
referred to the LGBT movement as a ‘rainbow plague’ analogous to the ‘red plague’ of
communism (TVN 24 2019).

PiS’s representatives, the public media, and members of the Church claim not to be attacking
LGBT individuals, but rather what they characterise as a destructive cultural radicalism or a
vague ‘LGBT ideology’. However, OSCE international observers of the election campaign
concluded that ‘nationalist and homophobic rhetoric gave rise to a sense of threat’ (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe 2019, 14). On multiple occasions, PiS politicians and supporters stressed the particular danger posed by the LGBT movement to children and to the institution of the family. Kaczyński asserted that the ‘LGBT and gender ideology’ was a foreign import responsible for the ‘sexualisation of children’, and threatening ‘our identity, our nation, its survival, and thus the Polish state’ (Rzeczpospolita 2019a). Importantly, PiS also told voters that the main opposition parties supported the dangerous postulates of the LGBT movement.

Kaczyński insisted at multiple campaign events that the opposition intended to deliver a cultural revolution that would destroy ‘authentic’ Polish culture, the family, Christian civilisation, and freedom of speech and religion (TVP Info 2019b). After the election, Prime Minister Morawiecki warned of an ‘ideological hand’ raised against children, whom his government had vowed to protect (Morawiecki 2019).

This rhetoric seems to have affected social attitudes in Poland. The general trend over the last two decades has seen Poles becoming more tolerant towards LGBT individuals, and even increasingly inclined to accept the notion of same-sex marriage. However, this trend has notably slowed over the last two years (Bożewicz 2019b). According to a recent survey, ‘gender’ ideology and the LGBT movement now represent the second greatest fear for Poles, after climate change (Pacewicz 2019). Among young men and PiS voters, the gender/LGBT threat represents the greatest fear. It seems likely that PiS used the anti-LGBT rhetoric principally for tactical reasons: firstly, to mobilise its religiously conservative base to vote; and, secondly, to compete for the young male vote against the even more radical anti-LGBT posture of far-right Confederation (Konfederacja). More generally, PiS’s cultural policy has been informed by a long-term strategy to absorb radical positions in order to embrace the broadest political spectrum.
and to eliminate right-wing opponents: in Kaczyński’s words, to ensure that ‘only the wall can be to the right of us’ (Lichocka 2008).

PiS’s message has been clear and consistent. In its populist version: the ‘false’ domestic elite of the opposition is in league with the advocates of a foreign ideology hostile to the authentic interests of the Polish nation. The threat is existential, affecting the very biological and cultural existence of the nation through the institution of the family. At the same time, as Kaczyński frequently argues, these foreign values pose a threat to Polish ‘freedom’ via the strictures of ‘political correctness’. Accordingly, he presents PiS’s mission as the defence of a pluralistic zone of freedom of speech and conscience against an alien, monistic system of enforced tolerance. Some of the party’s ideological allies in the Church hierarchy have even referred to the ‘LGBT ideology’ as a form of repressive ‘totalitarianism’ (Polsat News 2019). Yet, in response to this supposed ‘tyranny’ of political correctness and inclusive values, PiS has constructed its own anti-pluralist cultural ideology. Those who espouse a different value system to the preferred Catholic traditionalism are not merely political opponents, but constitute an existential threat to the very life of the nation.

Conclusion

In 2015, the casual observer of Polish politics might have been forgiven for assuming that the question of what sort of Poland should emerge after 1989 had been resolved, the answer being a flawed but generally improving liberal democracy. A mere four years later, it is clear that the answer to this question is as uncertain as it was when Jan Olszewski first raised it – in large part because the question of whose Poland it is to be still remains a matter of dispute. The populist turn in Polish politics has laid bare the overriding importance of metapolitical questions:
populism’s ‘us versus them’ logic is at heart not about whose ideas and values are best, but whose are legitimate. Even more fundamental is the question of who is legitimate – that is, which political actors or elites may lay sole claim to representing the essential interests of ‘the nation’.

Poland is by no means unique in this regard. As Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti have argued, the populist backlash in progress in the world more generally needs to be understood as a response to a different type of exclusionist practice: a ‘technocratisation’ of politics in which the legitimacy of political decisions inheres in the administrative competence and technical expertise of those who implement them (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti 2017, 335). If all that matters is warm water coming out of the tap, the only legitimate actor is the maintenance engineer. Other questions about the water – where it should come from, who pays for it, how much they pay, how to ensure it doesn’t run out – are removed from the purview of political debate. This is inherently at odds with the pluralistic promise of liberal democracy, according to which such concerns should be a matter of public deliberation and contestation.

By 2015, the scope of government in Poland had become constricted within a narrow set of bounds permitted by a particular conception of good governance. In PO, Poland had a governing party that was committed in principle to pluralism but shrank from it in practice. It was capable of fulfilling the objectives set by its own narrow terms of reference, but the pursuit of a post-ideological politics of administration left it with little else to do beyond administration itself. Yet, as Sawczuk (2018, 181) observes, political stability is not achieved by depriving politics of any conflict, but occurs when ‘all parties to a conflict are wont to maintain social peace rather than to spurn the instruments of cooperation available to them’ (Sawczuk 2018, 181). Stable cleavage politics consists of structured, institutionalised disagreement. The escape into the politics of
administration – in practice, the depoliticisation of former spheres of contestation – is therefore detrimental to the maintenance of social peace.

This ensured that when PiS came to power in 2015, it did so not in the context of political disputes over the varying merits of particular policies, but in the context of an unresolved dispute over the legitimate locus of political authority. As successive sections of this paper have detailed, PiS’s response to what it perceived as the hegemony of a ‘mono-power’ was to purge and replace the institutions responsible for that system’s self-replication, to redistribute economic power and a broader sense of social prestige to those who considered themselves the ‘losers’ of the post-1989 settlement, and to reassert a specific conception of Polish identity. While many of these actions served discrete policy objectives in their own right, their more important aspect was as component elements of a comprehensive challenge to the hegemonic authority of their predecessors. It was not simply about ousting the opposition from power temporarily, but effecting the permanent replacement of an illegitimate elite.

For all the flaws of Polish liberal democracy in 2015, it was not burdened by an original structural sin that made the populist backlash inevitable. There is an entirely plausible counterfactual universe in which PiS pursued those policy objectives that could be reconciled with an ordinary majority and the principles of liberal constitutionalism, reintroducing ideological contestation in piecemeal fashion. Yet instead, PiS chose to replace the post-communist ‘mono-power’ with one of its own, and its rationale for doing so echoed a latent but remarkably persistent dissensus over Poland’s post-1989 reforms. Opponents of PiS’s policies were not just political rivals, but elements hostile to the core interests of Poland and of ‘real’ Poles. Advocates of a more open society and those supposedly responsible for the transitional
course of economic development were not misguided political adversaries, but treacherous threats to the integrity of the nation (Kaczyński 2006a). Poland would therefore ultimately be redeemed not by a child benefit policy here or a reallocation of civil society funding there, but only by the defenestration of the Third Republic and its elites. If Polish politics is no longer dominated by the politics of the transition era, it remains in thrall to its metapolitical foundations.
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