



THE ROOTS OF POPULISM IN POLAND: UNSUSTAINABLE GROWTH AND CULTURAL BACKLASH

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In 2015 the populist authoritarian party Law and Justice won both parliamentary and presidential elections in Poland for the first time since the collapse of Jarosław Kaczyński's government in 2007. The victory came after eight elections in a row (local, parliamentary, presidential and European) that were lost against the Civic Platform party (Platforma Obywatelska) and their coalition partner the Polish Peasants' Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe). Formally, Andrzej Duda and Beata Szydło are president and prime minister, respectively, but actual power is in the hands of Law and Justice's chairmen – Jarosław Kaczyński – whose only official position is as a regular member of parliament. Since the new political formation has taken power, populism has entered Poland's parliament and dominated its public debate.

The Polish “golden age” and the populist turn

Economically Poland has been one of the best-performing countries in Europe since the collapse of the Iron Curtain. Its GDP per capita growth has been the best of all post-Soviet and post-socialist countries. Since accession to the EU structures in 2004 other key indices have been improving as well: nominal average yearly earnings nearly doubled between 2004 and 2016 (60% when adjusted for inflation), the minimum wage more than doubled nominally (80%, inflation-adjusted), unemployment decreased by over 12 percentage points, relative poverty dropped by nearly four percentage points and extreme poverty dropped by over five percentage points. There has not been a single year of economic contraction, not even during the 2008 economic crisis or the subsequent eurozone crisis.

However, much of this growth has been uneven. Income inequality grew strongly as a result of the

neoliberal shock therapy of the 1990s: the Gini coefficient rose from 0.27 in 1990 to 0.33 in 2000 before stabilising around 0.34-0.35 since 2005; and the unemployment level reached a peak of 20% in 2003 and 2004. The level of earnings in Poland is still three times lower than the EU average and just over a fifth of the average wage in the UK. Poland has a large share of temporary work contracts (28%) and leads the EU in terms of weekly working hours. Uncertain labour markets and limited opportunities have prompted nearly 2.4 million Poles (over 6% of the total population) to migrate to western European countries in search of a better life.

However, contrary to most western European countries, it was not the post-2008 recession that provided fertile ground for populist movements. The social impact of the crisis was much smaller than the impact of the transformation process of the 1990s and in fact never led to a recession. Therefore it is hard to argue that the success of populist movements and parties in 2015 was purely the result of a deterioration of social and economic conditions, because the populist electoral successes were much larger than the economic climate seemed to warrant.

There is a striking discrepancy between Polish people's assessment of their personal living conditions and their views on politics and economic conditions in general. While they have judged the latter to be bad year after year since 1989 (with minor exceptions), they have reported improvements in their personal living conditions.

Law and Justice has capitalised on this discrepancy in its long-term race for power. It built the narrative of "Poland in ruins" (in contrast to Civic Platform's electoral slogans of "green island" and "Poland under construction"), focusing on subjective negative perceptions of public life and the unfulfilled expectations of some groups. At the same time the narrative omitted facts about improving the socioeconomic indicators and proposed alternative explanations of reality in a post-truth fashion. The Polish case illustrates that growing prosperity per se is not necessarily an antidote to authoritarian populist rhetoric. It was precisely clever political leadership and fine-tuned rhetoric that appeared to be decisive in the Law and Justice party's victory.

The victory of populist rhetoric and onset of "demokratura"

Accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and EU structures were the great goals of the transformation period. Society could be motivated to make sacrifices for the sake of these goals, but once they

were achieved, Poles felt they were facing an uncertain future. The sense of hope that unified social aspirations was replaced by fear of external threats: the economic crisis that came from the USA and the eurozone, war between Russia and neighbouring Ukraine, and later on, the refugee crisis, Brexit and the possibility that Polish labour migrants' entitlement to work in western European countries could be reduced.

Meanwhile, the emerging middle class started to see the limits of growth. Some of its members were badly hit by the increase in the value of the Swiss franc, which affected thousands of holders of mortgages denominated in that currency. Similarly, frustration and fear among the young generation mounted. Millennials in Poland were the first generation with college attendance rates at the level of western European countries (some 50% of those under 30 years of age). They have acquired high occupational qualifications, learnt foreign languages and visited foreign universities during scholarships, which have created expectations about their future careers and lifestyle. Young Poles believed that they have equal economic status and perspectives to their Erasmus friends from western countries. Graduates collided with reality when entering the labour market. They have been forced to take unpaid internships or temporary and unqualified employment, and had to live with parents due to limited chances to rent or buy a flat and start a family.

Besides the economic grievances there has been growing uneasiness among parts of the populace about the diffusion of liberal social norms and human rights, such as feminism and LGBT rights. Studies show a growing social and political divide on moral-cultural rather than socioeconomic issues. The refugee crisis – and especially the European Commission's controversial policy for mandatory quotas of Syrian refugees for each member state – brought about an upsurge of xenophobia, similar to the populisms in western Europe.

The star of Civic Platform began to fade as economic and moral frustrations grew. The Law and Justice party spoke not only to their usual electorate in the 2015 campaign: older generations in rural areas and small towns with lower education levels and staunch Roman Catholics with conservative moral views. The party also reached out to younger generations (animated by young hip intellectuals – the so-called "hipster right") and to swing voters who were disappointed with eight years of rule by Civic Platform. Moreover, no left-wing party was able to reach the entry threshold, meaning the winning party benefited by gaining additional seats in the parliament.

To build the country back “from the ruins” Law and Justice promised to roll back the retirement age reform (to 60 for women and 65 for men from 67 for both men and women), to vastly expand family benefits under the Programme Family 500+ (Rodzina 500+), and to build many new apartments on state-owned land. All three programmes were introduced in 2016 on the basis of majoritarian doctrine, despite criticism from experts and funding concerns. The increase in public spending was supposed to be covered by improved VAT collection, a new sales tax and a new bank tax, but none of these programmes have yet been implemented and Poland will likely violate European budget rules.

Generous public spending was used to please constituencies and assuage critics in order to introduce radical changes “in the name of the people”. Law and Justice applied its doctrine of majoritarianism to the court system, violating liberties and using its majority in the parliament to dismantle existing checks and balances within the Polish democratic system. The independence of the Constitutional Tribunal and public broadcasters has been undermined and laws on public gatherings and the funding system of NGOs have been tightened. This so-called “*demokracja*” severely limits the role of the opposition parties and opportunities for public consultations, prompting the European Commission to issue a stark warning and start complementary Rule of Law Recommendation proceedings in January 2016.

This was not the only setback in foreign affairs. The current government has ruined good relations with European institutions and strategic partners (e.g. Germany, France), but also with Russia. Preferred partners have lost importance and reliability, namely the United Kingdom since Brexit and the USA with the advent of Donald Trump. Even the Visegrad countries are only moderately interested in cooperation with Poland under these conditions. In March 2017 the government of Beata Szydło caused a scandal during the elections of the president of the European Council. Instead of supporting Donald Tusk running for re-election, the government put up its own candidate, who failed to convince a single state – including Victor Orbán’s Hungary and other Visegrad countries.

Nevertheless, large majorities of Law and Justice party supporters feel their party has done well or very well at improving the quality of life, keeping its promises and maintaining democracy and the rule of law. Above all, the figures show a divided Poland: 50% think the government is performing badly in implementing its electoral promises, while some 56% are critical of its approach to democracy and rule of law. Among the liberal and left-wing opposition – Civic Platform, the Modern Poland party (Nowoczesna),

United Left and the Together party – this figure shoots up: some 70% of them think that the Law and Justice party government has performed very badly in safeguarding democracy.

