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The Emergence and Entrenchment of the Polexit Slogan in the Law and Justice political narratives

Abstract

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The main objective of this article is to shed light on the emergence and entrenchment of the Polexit slogan in Polish political discourse.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The authors sought to understand the emergence and consolidation of the Polexit narrative in the Polish public debate. An important assumption made by the authors is the central role of the national habitus, which forms the basis for the creation and interpretation of the central axis of the political debate in Poland. It should be noted that the concept of habitus itself is the subject of controversy due to some ambiguities regarding its meaning, but on the other hand, it provides a frame of reference for both the production and interpretation of narratives.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: In academic discourse, it is well known that the operationalisation of the concept of habitus in research practice is challenging. We see it as a set of dispositions that produce individual and collective practices in accordance with the schemes generated by history. The dispositions are derived from a shared understanding of Polishness.

RESEARCH RESULTS: In the collective imagination shaped in this way lies the most fundamental unifying element of the Polish people – the myth of being the victim. Both historiography and literature, based on the schemes of Romanticism, emphasise suffering as a unifying element of the Polish national community.

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CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Polish national habitus provides a fruitful frame of reference for understanding the PiS government's narrative towards the EU. The contextualisation of Polish political discourse has allowed the authors to describe the extent to which the statements of prominent Polish politicians are embedded in the specificity of the Polish cultural and historical context.

KEYWORDS:

Polexit, narratives, habitus, slogan

INTRODUCTION

In the second half of 2021, Poland's dispute with the institutions of the European Union (EU) was aggravated by the issue of the rule of law (Matthes 2022). The climax of the conflict came with Poland's Constitutional Tribunal's decision that the EU institutions "operate outside the limits of powers conferred on them by the Republic of Poland in treaties" (Trybunał Konstytucyjny, 2021) and a heated debate with Polish Prime Minister (PM) Mateusz Morawiecki in the European Parliament on 19th October 2021, on the rule of law in Poland (European Parliament Plenary, 2021). The conflict between Warsaw and Brussels that has emerged since the accession to power of the Law and Justice (PiS) party in Poland is permanent and multi-dimensional. Since 2016, the European Commission has been critical about personal changes in Poland's Constitutional Court (Majkowska-Szulc, 2020, pp. 174–193). A year later, Polish domestic policy was transferred to the EU forum during the debate and the vote on Donald Tusk's second term as the European Council President (Przybylski, 2018, p. 57). Later, the European Commission clashed with Warsaw on several issues: deforestation of the Białowieża Forest (Schiermeier, 2016), the alleged establishment of "LGBT-free zones" in Poland in 2019 (Bodnar & Brzezicki 2020), the adoption of a controversial near-total abortion ban that led to mass demonstrations in 2020, media regulations issued by the PiS government, which have been condemned for limiting freedom of expression, as well as the controversies regarding the subject of Poland blocking the EU's budget in 2021. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the European Union was accused of reacting too slowly and the lack of support for

Poland during the refugee crisis. Thus, the clash between Poland and the EU is presented in the dominant PiS narrative as a “permanent conflict” (Follis, 2019), leading to the appearance of the Polesxit slogan (only a slogan because there is no ideology or political agenda to support the idea itself!) in Polish and European public debate (Coakley, 2021; EPP Group, 2021). The emergence and entrenchment of the Polesxit slogan in Polish political debate is surprising if one considers the trend of Poles’ support for EU membership. According to CBOS, support for the EU in Poland during the PiS government never fell below 85%, making Poles the most pro-EU society (CBOS, 2023).

The article is divided into three parts. The first part contextualizes the Polesxit slogan within academic discourse. Subsequently, a qualitative analysis of the Polesxit-related public statements made by prominent members of PiS is provided. The final section offers conclusions.

I. ARTICLE’S PLACE IN THE ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

In the academic discourse surrounding Poland-EU relations, the initial wave of critical publications following Poland’s accession to the EU primarily addressed Euroscepticism (Markowski & Tucker, 2010; Riishøj, 2007). Subsequent publications on Euroscepticism often juxtaposed Poland’s situation with that of other Central and Eastern European states (Csehi & Zgut, 2021; Lázár, 2015). Hungary under Viktor Orbán serves as the main reference point of academic publications seeking to explain the shift in Poland’s relations with the EU. In our opinion, simple analogies functioning in the literature – such as “Warsaw is the second Budapest” (Lang, 2016) or correlations of the right-wing turn in Poland with Catholicism (Garton Ash, 2018; Žuk & Žuk, 2019) – might be deceptive. On the other hand, the English-language literature devoted to PiS rule in Poland, compared to, for example, publications on Brexit or Donald Trump phenomena, focuses almost exclusively on internal Polish aspects, while the literature on the US or UK also takes into account external/structural factors and tries to give the situation in these countries the qualities of generality. In other words, the case studies dedicated to these countries are intended to exemplify “some” global trends. Mindful of

this consideration, we chose a path that also focused on the domestic situation in Poland.

The background of the Polish approach to the EU is complex and rooted in the historical experiences of the nation. The experiences of the “old Union” are different and cannot serve as an analogy to explain the Polish situation. Paweł Kowal has already pointed to some analogies between Poland and Hungary in their attitude toward the EU. Kowal argues that Hungary suffers from the “Trianon complex” and “Poles, in turn, are extremely sensitive when it comes to their national independence” (Kowal, 2021). We are arguing that “extreme sensitivity” when it comes to independence results from the Polish national habitus. The national habitus consciously or unconsciously guides the Polish political elite while, simultaneously, PiS is also using the habitus to embed political rhetoric within it. An important premise posited by the authors is the central role of the national habitus, which underpins the formation and interpretation of the primary axis of political discourse in Poland. However, the concept of habitus is contentious, giving rise to disputes stemming from certain ambiguities surrounding its interpretation. The concept coined by Elias (although, some authors trace it back to Aristotle) was popularized by Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 2020, pp. 122–126) who treated this notion not as a theoretical concept in the strict sense but rather as “theory-method and thinking tool” (Costa & Murphy, 2015, p. 3). The academic discourse recognizes that the challenges “lie in the operationalisation of the idea of habitus, in capturing this fluid, broad concept with specific methodological tools” (Costa & Murphy, 2015, p. 15). We see it as a set of dispositions that produce individual and collective practices in accordance with the schemes generated by history (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 54). The practical effect is that it works not only at a conscious level and thus “it generates practices that can adapt to the objective structures of social world without being the product of an explicit intention to adapt” (Bourdieu, 2020, pp. 64–65). The national habitus provides a reference framework for the productions and interpretations of narratives. We define “national habitus” as created by the common understanding of the historical process: “durable dispositions and structures, responsible for organized, semi-conscious, or unconscious practices” (Chwedczuk-Szulc & Polus, 2020, p. 9). By “practice” we also mean the ability to create and

interpret discourses through specific cultural contexts. The dispositions are derived from a shared understanding of Polishness. In this sense, it may be argued, after Loyal and Quilley (Loyal & Quilley, 2020) that “national character” is included national habitus since national habitus is a border and relational concept.

Since the Polesxit debate is a relatively recent phenomenon, the number of academic studies devoted to it cannot be large. Cezary Trościak (Trościak, 2020) presented an analysis of the attitude of Polish society to EU membership using the notion of Polesxit as a possible scenario in Polish foreign policy, while Ewa Skudlarek-Śmiechowicz (Skudlarek-Śmiechowicz, 2018) conducted a discursive analysis of the Polesxit lexeme, based on data-mining engines. In October 2021, Polesxit was the subject of a heated debate in the Polish media. The split in opinions occurred, predictably, between the anti-government media (with *Gazeta Wyborcza* and TVN at the forefront), which mainly indicated the costs that would be associated with Polesxit, and the pro-government media (TVP Info, *Do Rzeczy*, *Gazeta Polska*), which argued that for the neoliberal and left-wing media even simply discussing Polesxit was out of the question.

The article is based on data derived from statements made by the most prominent PiS politicians in September and October 2021, when the subject of Polesxit appeared in the mainstream of Polish and European public debates. The authors composed the data corpus based on statements concerning the issue of Poland’s conflict with the EU and the appearance of the motive of Poland’s potential exit from the EU in the speech. Due to the relatively small data corpus, the authors decided to conduct a qualitative analysis and use contextualization as a major research technique.

II. QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF POLESXIT-RELATED PUBLIC STATEMENTS

The anti-EU wing has always existed in PiS, even before taking power in Poland in 2015. Nevertheless, one should not consider PiS’s predecessor – Porozumienie Centrum, as a Eurosceptic party. To this day, the so-called “breakthrough government” of Jan Olszewski remains important part of PiS’s mythology, with its main achievement being

the initiation of Poland's integration with the EU and NATO (Nyzio, 2020). Former Prime Minister Leszek Miller (who negotiated the terms of Poland's membership in the EU) recalled that during the accession negotiations Jarosław Kaczyński's attitude toward European integration was lukewarm. During an interview, Leszek Miller stated:

I remember him saying that joining the European Union should be delayed because the negotiated conditions are bad, and that the dogma that in 2004 we have to join the European Union should be dropped (Miller, 2020).

In 2006–2007, PiS formed a coalition government with two openly anti-EU parties—the League of Polish Families (Liga Polskich Rodzin) and Self-Defense (Samoobrona). It can be argued that one of the common points among the three coalition parties at the time was Euroscepticism; however, while the League of Polish Families was the most anti-European group, PiS took a stance of defending national interests but within the framework of EU structures. Having said that, an anti-EU wing has always existed within PiS, and Euroscepticism has become one of the defining features of right-wing politics in Polish political discourse. One of the most extreme examples of the anti-EU rhetoric of a high-ranking PiS politician can be found in Krystyna Pawłowicz's statements. Pawłowicz, a former PiS MP, and currently a judge of the Polish Constitutional Tribunal, is known for being in the most Eurosceptic wing of Law and Justice. In 2013, when she was serving as an MP, she stated that the EU “symbolizes a creation whose aim is the liquidation of nation states and the sovereignty of Poland.” She also called the EU flag “a rag” (Pawłowicz, 2013). Additionally, Pawłowicz's statement shows the way the right-wing PiS thinks about the EU. The Polish membership in the EU is tolerated as long as Poland's contributions to the EU budget are lower than the funds obtained from the EU. This situation is directly related to the pre-referendum debate on Poland's membership in the EU, which had been reduced to an economic calculation.

The process of identifying as a right-wing group, where Euroscepticism is one of the variables distinguishing liberal and leftist currents from the right, was made clear in PiS's 2015 election program. PiS self-defined itself as a “Euro-realist” party. The election manifesto stated:

We reject political correctness, which imposes restrictions that increasingly impact many Europeans, enforced today not only through cultural aggression but also through administrative measures and criminal sanctions. We do not accept the uncontrolled erosion of the sovereignty of European nations. We will resolutely defend our freedom by implementing the strongest possible legal barriers against such practices directed at Poland. This is our Euro-realism (Program Prawa i Sprawiedliwości, 2014, p. 13).

The dispute between the Polish government and EU institutions began to worsen in September 2021, when the European Commission asked the European Court of Justice to impose financial penalties on Poland due to the ongoing activities of the Disciplinary Chamber in the Polish judicial system (European Commission, 2021). The statement that led to the appearance of Polesxit as a theme in the public discourse was given by the chairman of the PiS Parliamentary Club and deputy speaker of the Sejm, Ryszard Terlecki. During the Economic Forum in Karpacz on 8 September 2021, he said:

If it goes as it is likely to go, we must look for drastic solutions. The British have shown that the dictatorship of the Brussels bureaucracy does not suit them, and they turned around and left (Terlecki, 2021).

The anti-government media interpreted this statement as an open announcement of Polesxit (Szostkiewicz, 2021) while the government spokesman emphasized that Polesxit was not an option considered by the Polish authorities (zew, 2021). Nevertheless, one day after Terlecki's statement, another high-ranking PiS politician—the deputy chairman of PiS, Marek Suski—gave two anti-EU statements during his visit in Radom and later during the Parliamentary Committee on Energy, Climate, and State Assets that he chaired. In Radom, he stated that:

Delegalized Poland fought during World War II with one invader (i.e., Germany), fought against the Soviet occupier, and we will fight the Brussels occupier, when Brussels sends upon us governors who are to impose order in Poland, bring us to our knees, so that we may become a German land, not a proud state of free Poles (qm, 2021).

In this statement, the deputy chairman of PiS used the word governor (pol. *namiestnik*). Governors were sent to Poland by the Russians

on behalf of the Tsars during the period of the partitions (Mażewski, 2015). Following his statement, Suski was asked for clarification in the Sejm: had he really said that Brussels occupied Poland? He repeated:

If a nation, a country, or a group of countries enforces the surrender of sovereignty, and this is the case with the Union, which forces us to renounce the supremacy of Polish law over European law and threatens us with severe sanctions if we do not do so, then that amounts to being treated like a slave. Poland cannot be treated like this. We are a proud nation, and we will defend our sovereignty. We will not allow this kind of OCCUPATION. We did not allow the German occupation, we did not allow the Soviet occupation, and we will not allow the Brussels one (YouTube, 2021).

Suski is referring to the Polish sense of dignity, which manifested itself throughout history in the repeated contestation of Poland's control by foreign powers. Polish Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) calls this deeply embedded in the national psyche combination of a sense of national pride and constant striving for independence ("the Polish gene of freedom"). The IPN president, Jarosław Szarek, stated:

The struggle to regain independence was a complex, decades-long process. The energy of many generations of armed, diplomatic, intellectual, and spiritual efforts has created a strong foundation permanently engraved in the libertarian DNA of Poles (IPN, 2020).

Such a rhetorical figure appeals to Poles regarding the national, family and individual experiences of the last two centuries. What IPN calls the "Polish gene of freedom," we argue is the main component of the Polish national habitus: Polishness manifests itself when it is threatened. Suski presented today's "dependence" on the EU politicians and officials as a direct continuation of past threats. The abovementioned "governor's" power is immediately recognized as a foreign and hostile element in the Polish political landscape. The same aspect of the Poland–EU relations was highlighted in the Sejm by Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki on 14th October 2021 (just before his departure to the European Parliament for the debate on the rule of law in Poland). The only difference is that the actions of the opposition were presented as actions of people whose moral compasses had been broken by external forces. The PM said:

Seventeen years ago, we approached the EU ashamed; we were afraid of how they would receive us, we felt like a poor relative. I think the vast majority of you will agree. You still want a Union where Poland humbly stands in the corner and agrees to everything that comes from this Union. But this is not the right attitude, because whoever does not respect himself will not earn the respect of others (loud applause from the Parliament). Some of you do not have respect for Poland and Poles, and therefore in our tradition, you are instead those who look somewhere outside, for some advice, for support. We had a period in the past, before 1989, when the government kept looking at Big Brother. I think that part of the Polish elite is still stuck there, like with Stockholm Syndrome. They are constantly looking for someone to orientate themselves toward. You don't have to orientate yourself toward anyone! Look at Warsaw, Poland, the Polish countryside, Polish cities and towns. This is the sovereign. The Polish nation (loud applause from the Parliament) (*Wprost*, 2021).

Later in his speech, the PM seized the opposition's main slogan "Constitution!" — which had been used to protest the changes introduced by PiS to the judiciary system as being against the law. Morawiecki also referred to the superiority of the Polish constitution to EU law. At that point, PiS MPs began chanting "Constitution!". The PM greeted this with the statement "Constitution, to a hundred bisurmans!" (pol. *do stu bisurmanów*), adding with a smile that this could be considered politically incorrect today. The expression *to a hundred bisurmans* will be understood only by a Pole who remembers the books of Henryk Sienkiewicz. *Bisurman* is a contemptuous term for a Muslim from the period of Poland's wars with Turkey in the seventeenth century, and in Sienkiewicz's novel it was used by Mr. Zagłoba, a nobleman who was the embodiment of Polish Sarmatia with its shortcomings, but also loyalty to brothers in arms, patriotism, and ingenuity. The PM places Polish independence in the centre of his argument. He presents it in terms of historical continuity and necessity. The PM introduced a binary opposition between healthy Poland and the pathological "Stockholm Syndrome" the other Poland has been unconsciously and continuously suffering from for at least the last 300 years. Healthy Poland manifests itself in seeking inspiration to act in what is Polish — in Polish villages, towns and cities. The local communities (large urban agglomerations are not the traditional PiS electorate) are the country's source of strength

and traditions, which gives hope for its future prosperity (Zagała, 2020). Tradition is discursively connected with dignity. Poland's land, properties, and even rights might have been taken away by external forces, but dignity and tradition were the basis of the Poles' imperative to resist. Today, dignity and tradition are manifested primarily in caring for Poland's interests. This is done by the government whose prime minister ensures that Polish interests are respected in the EU.

Five days later, the PM spoke in the European Parliament during a debate on the rule of law in Poland. Although Morawiecki is fluent in English he delivered the speech in Polish. Once again, he referred to the aspect of dignity, which was derived from Polish history, stating that:

We are a proud country. Poland is one of the countries with the longest history of statehood and the development of democracy. In the twentieth century, we fought for the freedom of Europe and the world three times at the expense of significant losses. In 1920, we saved Berlin and Paris from the Bolshevik onslaught. Then in 1939, we were the first to go to the murderous battle with Germany, the Third Reich, which impacted the fate of the war. Finally, in 1980, when "Solidarity" we gave hope for overthrowing another totalitarianism—the cruel communist system. The post-war reconstruction of Europe was possible thanks to the sacrifice of many nations, but not all could benefit from it (Morawiecki, 2021).

Poland is once again presented as a country that did not surrender to the pressure of external forces. The Poles have sacrificed a lot while fighting not only for their freedom but also for the freedom of other Europeans. In this context, the EU institutions that instruct Poland on shaping its legal system are seen as another incarnation of the partitioning powers of the past. This idea was strengthened in the latter part of the speech:

We receive paternalistic instructions about democracy, the rule of law, how to shape our Homeland. We are taught that we are making wrong choices, that we are too immature, that our democracy is supposedly "young"—this is the fatal direction of the narrative [...]. Penalties, repressions of economically stronger countries against those still struggling with the legacy of remaining on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain—this is not the right way! (Morawiecki, 2021).

In the PM's rhetoric, directed at Members of the European Parliament (although he was accused during the debate that his speech was directed at the PiS supporters back home rather than at the European Parliament), history was the focal point. Morawiecki presupposed that the unique moral attitude of Poles gives them a special place among the nations, and Poland feels responsible for Europe. In recent history, Poland has always fought alone. And the migratory crisis on the eastern border of the EU, triggered by Alexander Lukashenko, gave Morawiecki another argument—an indication that, as in the past, Poland is currently standing alone against the threat from the East:

Today, when the eastern border of the Union is the target of an organized attack, in which migrations from the Middle East are cynically used to destabilize it, Poland gives Europe security, acting together with Lithuania and Latvia as a barrier that protects this border. And by strengthening our defence potential—we are enhancing the security of the Union in the most traditional sense (Morawiecki, 2021).

Foreign powers, especially Germany and Russia, play a central role in this image of the eternal struggle between the forces of good (Poles) and evil. Polish heroism is contrasted with violence and cruelty and patriotism with servility toward foreign powers. The external threat is combined with the image of the Polish opposition as an advocate of the interests of external influences. Statements suggesting that “instructions” for a given Polish politician were written in Moscow or Berlin are common in the Polish political debate. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the slogan of Polesxit did not appear as often in the public debate as during the migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border. Nevertheless, the ambiguous attitude of Berlin and the lack of the EU's substantial support during the influx of war refugees resulted in harsh criticism of EU institutions combined with calls for the most far-reaching sanctions on Russia. Poland has become the main advocate of accelerating the process of Ukraine's accession to the European Union, and in this context, maintaining the narrative about Poland's hypothetical withdrawal from the EU would not make sense. Polesxit's slogan was replaced by calls for the need for EU reforms and the immediate imposition of severe sanctions on Russia headed by the abandonment of Russian

hydrocarbons imports. The common denominator of PiS's political narrative in the context of relations with the EU remains the criticism of Germany. The tone of this narrative was set by Jarosław Kaczyński, who in an interview in *Gazeta Polska* stated that:

Germany does not treat Poland as an equal partner – their goal is to divide us, limit us, keep us under the foot. [...] And to be clear I would like it to be otherwise, and I hope that someday this country will find the strength to deeply change. For now, in Europe – I regret it – Germany is an extremely destructive element (*Gazeta Polska*, 2022).

The political rhetoric of PiS is based on several themes. It is founded on the reinterpretation of history in a conservative and romantic spirit combined with a positivist component, which manifests itself in praise of the self-help rule in international relations. During the migratory crisis on its eastern border, the PiS government cannot ask the EU or NATO for support. Poland must “defend” Europe alone, as it always did. In this narrative, European institutions and bureaucracy should express gratitude for Poland and immediately stop attacking the country, which is defending the EU border. Without ruminating over whether the “image of reality” created by PiS is “true,” it should be emphasized that it is coherent.

III. CONCLUSIONS

The Polish national habitus provides a fruitful reference framework for the understanding of the PiS government narrative toward the EU. Poland under the PiS rule, cannot be simplistically categorized solely as an exemplar of “ethno-nationalist” or “right-wing tendencies”, as frequently portrayed in Western academic discourse. Such general categories may explain similarities between countries, but they do not describe national specificities. Despite the apparent similarities in the development of the Polish and Hungarian political regimes, a proper understanding is only possible by referring to textual meanings rooted in history. The contextualisation of Polish political discourse has allowed the authors to describe the extent to which the statements of prominent Polish politicians were embedded in the specificity of the Polish cultural and historical context. The authors have attempted

to fill the gap in the existing literature on the necessary background of Polish politics by using concrete examples to show how the utterances of politicians were created within the broad cultural and historical matrix. The instrumental use of history and the selective selection of “facts” as a means of legitimising and rationalising current policies is a common phenomenon. Poland is no exception. The PiS, consciously and partly unconsciously, has effectively reinterpreted national myths and history and has managed to establish numerous analogies between the collective memory of Poles and the EU’s policy towards Warsaw. The narrative of the Law and Justice Party unequivocally suggests that the party has construed Poland and Polish identity through the lens of threat. In other words, based on emotions and historical experience, Poland, in its true form, can only manifest itself when its existence is threatened.

The PiS government, even if unconsciously and without references to the Bourdieuan term, has understood well the national habitus of the Poles. PiS focused on external threats, based on the social perception of the experience of the partitions (when the European powers “came to an agreement over the Poles’ heads” as a popular phrase goes), the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, the Yalta and Potsdam conferences, when the superpowers decided Poland’s fate. Germany’s agreement with Russia became popular again as a rhetorical figure because it externalized the deepest fears of the past. This message was reinforced by the political struggle in which the opposition also used the rhetoric of the state of emergency as a frame for interpreting the ruling party as a camp who had seized the state. However, the competing project appealing to the vision of a “return to Europe” proved to be less politically effective in the long run because it did not define the enemy and thus could not focus on public emotions. The political elites “entering Europe” with liberal and pro-European attitudes did not properly calculate the scale of the national populist reaction to the intensive implementation of the European project. Consequently, the most Euro-enthusiastic state in the EU questioned the foundations of European integration and under the PiS rule adopted the rhetoric of a hypothetical Polesxit.

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