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THE REVENGE OF THE NATION

POLITICAL PASSIONS IN CONTEMPORARY POLAND

■ AZILIZ GOUEZ

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#POLAND

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Aziliz Gouez is an anthropologist by training, with an interest in issues of identity, memory and political symbolism. Between 2013-2017 she was the Chief Speechwriter for the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins. As a Research Fellow at the Jacques Delors Institute from 2005 to 2010 she directed a research programme on the predicaments of European identity in the post-1989 era, looking in particular at the discrepancy between economic integration, East-West migration of labour and capital on the one hand, and political and cultural patterns on the other.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The victory of Law and Justice (PiS) in the 2015 Polish parliamentary elections came as a shock to all those who deemed Poland securely set on liberal democratic tracks. The new ruling party and its leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, have since embarked the Polish nation upon a fierce battle with the European Union to regain its sovereignty and, together with it, its "dignity". This paper examines the roots of Law and Justice's appeal amongst the Polish electorate and its resonance beyond Poland. Indeed the political and cultural agenda championed by Poland's national-conservative party is one that is gaining ground, not just in neighbouring Hungary and in Central Europe, but across the European Union. An "alternative idea for Europe" is emerging, which conjures up interpretations of democracy and solidarity, of the articulation between national and supra-national, as well as notions of identity, values and religion that run right to the heart of the European project as we know it.

Through the case of Poland, this paper thus intends to contribute to our understanding of the profound political shifts underway in Europe today. It starts by analysing the *social dimension* of PiS's political project, its emphasis on the province, on redistribution, and on the role of state intervention. It then turns to the distinctive ideological grammar and historical repertoire that shape the Polish government's *politics of national identity.* Doing so, it looks at how these two strands of Law and Justice's project – social policy and nationalist assertion – feed off one another. For it is the conflation between personal and national dignity, between redistributive justice and national revival, which defines PiS's specific brand of politics, and its strength. It is not just through the distribution of material benefits that Law and Justice appeals to Polish voters, but also by giving them a stake in the national drama, by offering them a shelter, a place in the world – a place of which they can be proud, a country that is theirs, and theirs only.

Ultimately, this paper is an invitation to reflect on the conditions for a renewal of liberal pluralism in Europe today. Can an alternative be built to the Kaczyński-Orbán-Salvini agenda – an alternative which would do justice to the aspirations for place, identity, community and equality which are mounting across Europe while holding firm on the four freedoms, on universalist principles and on liberal pluralism? These are the questions which the Polish liberal opposition and the Polish left, but also the next European Parliament, will have to tackle head on.

The 'post-communist' euphoria is over and the premonitions of imminent dangers are mounting. The monster is dying in its own monstrous way. Shall we see another monster take its place, a series of bloody struggles between its various remnants? How many new countries will emerge from the chaos and what will they be: democratic, dictatorial, national-fascist, clerical, civilised, barbaric? Will millions of refugees, escaping from famine and war, stampede into Europe? ... The only thing we know for certain: nothing is certain; nothing is impossible.

Leszek Kołakowski, "Amidst moving ruins" (1993)

INTRODUCTION

In 1989, Pierre Hassner responded with a measure of caution to Francis Fukuyma's famous essay, "The End of History?". Questioning Fukuyama's suggestion that the triumph of Western liberal democracy in the wake of the collapse of Soviet communism might represent the final form of human government, Hassner pointed out that it was perhaps audacious to assume that passions had, once and for all, given way to interests. "Is it really impossible, he asked, that the search for action in a prosaic society, the search for scapegoats in a bewildered one, or, simply, the thirst for absolutes and for hierarchy within the soul of individuals, should produce, if not the rebirth of fully-fledged ideological doctrines, then at least a primitive style of politics based on resentment, fear and hysteria", and a resurgence of the authoritarian state?[1] Returning to this interrogation around the robustness of liberal and universalist values in a 1991 article, Pierre Hassner observed: "the aspirations which led to nationalism and socialism, namely the yearning for community and identity on the one hand, and that for equality and solidarity on the other, will always come back."[2]

The political trajectory of Poland in the three decades since the Round Table talks of the Spring of 1989[3] provides a compelling illustration of this reminder formulated by Hassner at the outset of a new era. By the end of the first decade of the XXIst century, Poland had appeared to most international observers to have firmly settled for the classic model of Western-style liberal democracy. This had come, admittedly, after confused beginnings: the splendid unity sustained by the banned trade union Solidarność under communist rule had not held in freedom, and its leaders had soon started to show signs of ideological strife, some of them embracing the path of free-market economics and secularisation, while others championed a close alliance with the Church and railed against the "selling out" of the country to foreign investors; frequent changes of government, each favouring a distinctive orientation of European and foreign policy, combined with the proliferation of new political parties, often short-lived and riven with internal splits, had initially made it difficult

1. Hassner, Pierre. "Response to Fukuyama." *The National Interest*, no. 16, 1989, pp. 22-24.
2. Hassner, Pierre, "L'Europe et le spectre des nationalismes." *Esprit*, October 1991, p. 22.
3. These talks initiated by the communist government with opposition groups led to the landslide victory of Solidarność in the June 1989 elections and to the dismantlement of Poland's communist regime.

to discern whether the emerging political regime would be shaped by traditionalist nationalists or by Western-leaning modernists. The picture was further blurred by the ideological hybridity of many political alliances, the complexity of individual biographies, and the shifting nature of loyalties and even friendships.

However, passed these twists and turns of the first two decades of freedom, many liberal commentators felt confident that Poland's political situation had stabilised. The coming to power of the overtly pro-EU, pro-market, Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska*, or PO), in 2007, three years after Poland had become a member of the European Union, was widely interpreted as a sure sign of political "normalisation". In contrast to the nationalist fire and strident anti-German rhetoric which, from October 2005 to November 2007, had characterised Polish political discourse under the twin leadership of Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński and their national-conservative Law and Justice party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, or PiS), the centre-right PO government proceeded to establish friendly relationships with Brussels and Berlin, and it implemented a set of economic policies that were in tune with the broad principles of ordoliberalism and EU budgetary discipline. Throughout its eight years in government – under the premiership of Donald Tusk from 2007 to 2014, and then of Ewa Kopacz for another year – the Civic Platform thus succeeded in boosting Poland's European credentials, positioning the country as an important diplomatic player (in particular in the early days of the Ukrainian crisis) and giving the European Council its second President. Moreover, should one concentrate on aggregate growth figures only, this government appeared to have navigated rather well the crisis precipitated by the global financial crash of 2008.

The victory of Law and Justice in the 2015 parliamentary elections therefore came as a shock to all those who deemed Poland securely set on liberal democratic tracks. The new ruling party and its reclusive leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, swiftly and unabashedly pushed a narrative that cast the Polish nation in an unrelenting battle with the European Union to regain its sovereignty and, together with it, its "dignity". The new government categorically refused to open Poland's doors to even a small number of refugees in the midst of a grave humanitarian crisis, and it initiated a highly contentious reform of the Polish judicial system, despite stringent internal and external criticism. The decision taken by the European Commission on 20th December 2017 to trigger, for the first time, article 7 of the EU Treaty in light of the "clear risk of a serious breach of the rule of law in Poland",

has not altered the course of PiS's political project.[4] The rupture in both tone and practice is such that we are left to wonder if a change of regime is not in fact underway in Warsaw, with Poland joining Orbán's Hungary in the expanding bloc of "illiberal democracies".[5] However unpleasant this new regime may appear to those who cherish democratic pluralism and the rule of law, it is important to try and understand the roots of Law and Justice's appeal amongst the Polish electorate. It would be too easy to dismiss these voters as uncouth, politically immature, and hopelessly bound to an obscurantist version of Catholicism. Beyond such caricatures, there are serious socio-economic underpinnings to the electoral success of PiS – and ones that alert us to wider trends at play, not just in Poland or in Central Europe, but across the European Union.

This paper will start by examining the social dimension of PiS's political project, its emphasis on the province, on redistribution, and on the role of state intervention. It will then turn to the distinctive ideological grammar and historical repertoire that shape PiS's politics of national identity. Doing so, it shall look at how these two strands of PiS's project – social policy and nationalist assertion – interact and feed off one another. **For it is the conflation between personal and national dignity, between redistributive justice and national revival, which defines PiS's specific brand of politics, and its strength.** It is not just through the distribution of material benefits that Law and Justice appeals to the disenfranchised, to those who feel they have been wronged, those who aspire for more, but also by giving them a stake in the national drama, by offering them a shelter, a place in the world – a place of which they can be proud, a country that is theirs, and theirs only. In this process, the ruling party is also redefining the place of Poland in Europe, predicated upon new geopolitics of identity.

Through the case of Poland, this paper thus intends to contribute to our understanding of the profound political shifts underway in Europe today. Indeed the ongoing conflict between the European Commission and the Polish government is more than a transitory and circumscribed clash. It conjures up interpretations of democracy and solidarity, of the articulation between national and supra-national, as well as notions of identity, values, history and religion that run right to the heart of European unity.

4. European Commission, "Rule of Law: European Commission acts to defend judicial independence in Poland", Press release, Brussels, 20 December 2017

5. For a definition of the nature of this regime, see Viktor Orbán's speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer University, on 30th July 2014. Unlike the Hungarian Prime Minister, the Polish government does not, however, claim the status of "illiberal democracy" for Poland.

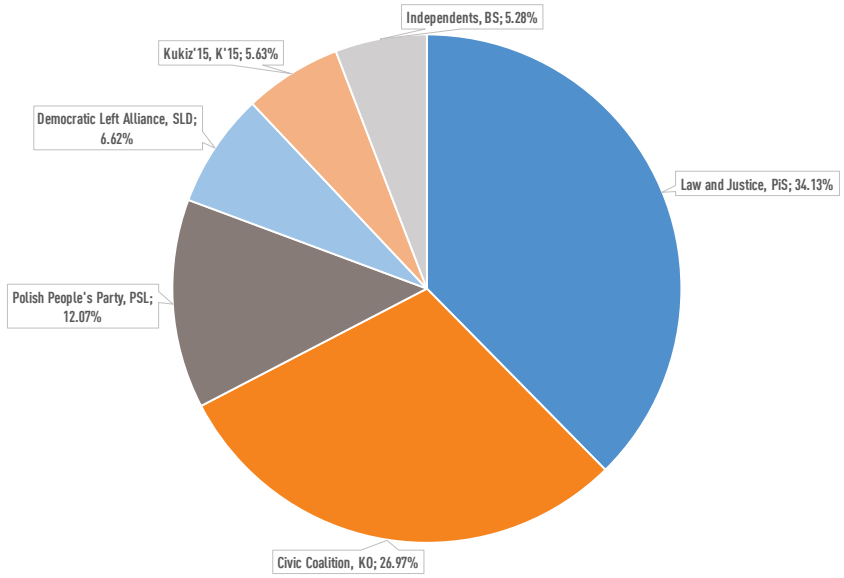
1 ▪ SOCIAL POLICY FOR GOOD PEOPLE

1.1 The 2018 local elections and the battle for the Polish province

On 21st October and 4th November 2018, Poles were called to vote for councillors and mayors in regional, county and municipal assemblies across the country. These elections – the first since Law and Justice swept into office in 2015 – were held by all sides to be a crucial test for the ability of the ruling party to consolidate its power by winning over local authorities, a level of government until then largely controlled by the opposition. Not only do regional assemblies (*sejmiki*) play a vital role on the distribution of EU funds, but thousands of public jobs are also dependent of the ruling party at that level. The stakes were all the higher as these local elections marked the kick-off of an intense electoral marathon – with European and parliamentary elections scheduled for the Spring and Autumn of 2019, and then Presidential elections in 2020 –, hence the importance of setting the right tone. As Jarosław Kaczyński put it in an interview with *Gazeta Polska*, "we [PiS] are preparing for a long march. One needs, not two, but *at least* three terms … With a good change in local government, reforming Poland, smashing post-communist cliques, would be much more effective."[6] These elections were also widely viewed as a plebiscite on the government's transformative programme of socio-economic reform. Observers were waiting to see if the "silent majority" – the disenfranchised beneficiaries of PiS's redistributive measures – would rise to vote, thus creating the enduring electoral base (and giving PiS the status of a permanent majority) for which the party has been calling. Before we proceed to examine the exact nature and appeal of the ruling party's programme of so-called "good change", it is important to draw the main lessons from this first electoral test on PiS's "long march" to "consolidated power." Indeed without a detailed picture of Poland's contemporary political landscape, one might easily lose a sense of proportion, either taking at face value the tone of official optimism sported by PiS, or slipping into the bleak predictions often encountered in relation to Polish politics.

6. Jarosław Kaczyński, Interview with *Gazeta Polska*, 30th January 2018.

FIGURE 1 ▪ Regional assemblies election results, Poland, 2018



The glaring and most crucial outcome of these elections is **the confirmation of a stark divide between Poland's urban and rural worlds** (which translates into a geographical divide between Western and Eastern Poland). Law and Justice won 34% of the vote in the regional assemblies, its best result so far in local elections, but it failed to win a single big city. Importantly, it failed to win Warsaw, the liberal heartland, which the government had designated as a strategic battleground, and where a victory would have had resounding symbolic significance. Despite the PiS candidate Patryk Jaki's call to Varsovians to "take up arms *en masse*", as they had done during the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, "to defend all those humiliated during the last twelve years" and "throw the PO into the rubbish heap",[7] the capital city voters did mobilise, but to elect Civic Platform's rising star, Rafał Trzaskowski, in the first round of the election. The "Civic Coalition" (KO) – the circumstantial alliance forged between the Civic Platform, the smaller liberal party *Nowoczesna* and the left-wing *Inicjatywa Polska* (IP) led by high-profile feminist activist Barbara Nowacka – also won in Kraków, Łódź, Poznań, Wrocław and, after some tribulations,

7. Speech delivered by Patryk Jaki on 19th October 2018, at a concert in Warsaw.

in Gdańsk[8]. In all these cities, the high voter turnout is testament to the vitality of urban opposition to Law and Justice's political project. In rural areas, meanwhile, PiS received nearly 40% of the vote. This result appears to vindicate the ruling party's aspiration, as captured by Defence Minister Mariusz Blaszczak, when he declared on the public radio, a few short days before the first round: "What is most important to us now is to tie up with those who identify themselves with the local authorities."[9]

Law and Justice did not fully achieve, however, one of its chief objectives in these elections, namely the "eradication" of the so-called "Polish Peasants' Party" (*Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe*, or PSL), an old agrarian organisation which survived, albeit in socialist guise, under communism, and whose four MEPs today sit alongside the nineteen PO lawmakers in the European People's Party. As a party of local political dynasties and notables, PSL benefits from robust grassroots networks and a distinctive capacity to distribute money, positions and prestige in regions and municipalities. Although PSL's performance was reduced by half in comparison with 2014, it retained its third position, securing 12% of the regional vote. As for the KO, it performed better than expected at that regional level, reaping an overall 27% of the vote. The scale of Law and Justice's victory is further qualified by the party's weak coalition potential. In the 2014 local elections, it had won the most seats in six regional assemblies but ended up controlling only one. This time, PiS came first in nine out of sixteen regions, obtaining over 50% of the seats in six of them. In the three *sejmiki* without a clear majority, PiS must compromise with "independent" politicians (*Bezpartyjni Samorządowcy*). Although anticipated by many commentators during the campaign, the alliance with Kukiz'15 did not take place – the variegated "anti-system" grouping led by former rock star Paweł Kukiz, having scored just over 5% of the regional vote.

Overall, these 2018 local elections may not have enabled Law and Justice to entrench its power across the whole range of Poland's local authorities, yet the ruling party largely succeeded in establishing itself as the natural representative of the Polish province. The peril this fracture poses for the future of European integration reaches far beyond Poland. Indeed the gap between the political trajectories of vibrant urban centres on the one hand, and struggling peripheral communities on the other, is one that is widening

8. The KO candidate in Gdańsk was Jarosław Wałęsa (son of Lech), but he lost in the first round to outgoing mayor and former PO member, Paweł Adamowicz, who was supported by KO in the second round.

9. Reuters, "Poland's PiS gains in provinces, but support erodes in big cities - election results", 25th October 2018.

across the European Union. **Everywhere, we see the former embrace the possibilities afforded by the European promise, while the latter tend to seek the shelter of political parties who advocate a return to national sovereignty.** The urgent challenge, for all those political forces across Europe who are committed to pursuing the path of supranational cooperation, is to offer new, sensitive responses to both the anxieties and the aspirations of so many citizens who yearn for more secure cultural, social and economic bearings. In Poland, this challenge is even more acute for the left than it is for the centre-right opposition: after a historic failure to gain a single seat in Parliament in 2015, the former communist, social-democratic SLD registered only 6.5% of the vote in this 2018 contest, while the new generation of committed, imaginative and principled activists revolving around *Razem* and the Greens (*Zieloni*) got 1.5% and 1.1% respectively.

1.2 "Good change": redistribution, family and the active state

In his introduction to a collection of studies into the programme of thorough socio-economic transformation implemented by Law and Justice under the banner of "good change", Michał Sutowski emphasises the "serious dilemma" this programme poses to the Polish left.[10] In 2015, many left-wing analysts had expected the newly elected national-conservative government to repeat the transmutation of the years 2005-2007, when its solidarist, anti-liberal campaign rhetoric had swiftly given way to mainstream economic and fiscal policies. This would have made it much easier, Sutowski observes, to build a clear left-wing alternative to both the pragmatic policies of the centre-right PO and the free market nationalism of PiS. Three years later, however, these expectations appear largely misguided. The "good change" project, through its emphasis on redistribution and state action, introduced a real break with the theories of development which had prevailed in Poland since 1989. This rupture must be located within the wider intellectual shift in economic and political thinking precipitated by the 2008 global crisis of financial capitalism. Ever since, in Poland as indeed across the EU, **the language of state intervention, protection, national economic sovereignty and social solidarity has been perking up.** And in Poland as elsewhere, this has also brought about conceptual and ideological chaos, leaving the social democrats to scout for new bearings while deploring the "embezzlement of their electorate" by the right-wing populists.

10. Sutowski, Michał (ed.), *Ekonomia polityczna „dobrej zmiany"*, Instytut Studiów Zaawansowanych, Warsaw, 2017

Three years is a short spell to definitively assess the nature and scope of the reforms introduced by PiS. The task is all the more arduous as within the government itself, tensions can be detected between the various economic doctrines that prevail, not just in different state departments – from the centralist, interventionist turn in industrial policy to the neoliberal outlook encountered, for example, in the ministry of science – but also within departments, as illustrated by the oscillation between (market) individualism and (state-managed) solidarism in the field of healthcare reform.[11] Beyond these qualifications, PiS's government can be broadly characterised by its bold affirmation of the virtues of "the active state" (*aktywnego państwa*)[12]. In the wake of the 2008 crisis, this re-legitimation of state intervention must be grasped against the backdrop of the **rising struggle, at global level, between the Western model of cultural, economic and political liberalism and the Far Eastern model of interventionist development and authoritarian capitalism.** Tellingly, the challenge mounted by Law and Justice to the European Union's package of liberal values has been accompanied, in the Polish public debate, by the emergence of references to China, and in particular to Justin Yifu Lin's new structuralist development economics,[13] alongside declarations on the tightening of cooperation with the New Silk Road project.[14] PiS being a patriotic party at heart, these declarations have also come with invocations of the statist tradition of the interwar Second Polish Republic and Eugeniusz Kwiatkowski's grandiose "Central Industrial District" scheme (which was cut short by the outbreak of the war in 1939).

Whatever discrepancies one might point out between rhetoric and practice, or between stated ambitions and an unyielding reality (in a context where globalised economic trends seriously constrain the ability of politics to transform human life), the fact remains that PiS's "active state" philosophy has translated into one of the largest programmes of social transfers implemented in Poland since 1989. The government has introduced a minimum hourly wage, as well as handouts for schoolchildren and free

11. Libura, Maria, "Reforma ochrony zdrowia, czyli powolny zmierzch rynkowego fundamentalizmu", in Sutowski, M., *op.cit.*, pp. 229-248.

12. Revealingly, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, an economist by training, wrote the introduction to the Polish edition of Mariana Mazzucato's book, *The Entrepreneurial State (Przedsiębiorcze państwo).*

13. Cf. Lin, Justin Yifu, *New Structural Economics. A Framework or Rethinking Development and Policy*. The World Bank, 2012. For a succinct critique of Lin's economics, see Dani Rodrick, *Comments on 'New Structural Economics' by Justin Yifu Lin*.

14. Golik, Katarzyna, "Polski model z chińską specyfiką?", in Sutowski, M., *op.cit.* pp. 181-202.

(basic) medicine for people over 75 years of age; it has decoupled access to healthcare from payments of social insurance and it has reversed the unpopular PO decision to raise the retirement age to 67, bringing it back to 60 for women and 65 for men. Its flagship measure has been the so-called "Family 500 +" programme, aimed at encouraging fertility and reducing child poverty through the provision of a universal family subsidy of 500 złoty (about 120 euro) a month for every child after the first child (and from the first child for those with the lowest incomes). This programme has made a real difference to the daily life of hundreds of thousands of households across the country,[15] in particular in rural areas, where families tend to be larger and poverty more acute. Yet it is common to hear supporters of the liberal opposition deride the Family 500+ programme as a scheme designed to "buy the electorate", and claim that poorer parents do not in fact spend the money on their children, but on themselves, on gambling and alcohol.

Views of this kind, which appear to have no foundation other than preconceptions about the mores of the lower classes, fall short of capturing the nature of popular support for Law and Justice. So do those views which treat the electoral rise of PiS as a mere expression of ideological anger. It would be wrong to describe Poland as a country in which the silent majority is deeply hostile to "foreign countries" and indifferent to the rule of law. Many electors may not support PiS's attacks on the independence of the Polish courts or plans to limit women's abortion rights (as the repeated, nationwide "black protests" against these plans seem to suggest), yet they value the ruling party's prioritizing of fundamental social needs. As pointed out by Green party activist Bartłomiej Kozek in a perceptive opinion piece, PiS's strength lies in that it has placed social issues at the heart of its discourse, while the opposition tends to focus on more abstract themes such as the Constitutional Tribunal, freedom of assembly, or freedom of speech. The element strikingly missing from this list, Kozek argues, is "freedom from poverty."[16] The appeal of the "active state" doctrine is further reinforced by the rupture it introduced with the tone of impossibilism, and such slogans as "it cannot be done" or "we cannot afford it", which infused the Civic Platform rule during the lean years of crisis. According to Michał Sutowski, for all the rational premises of PO's budgetary prudence, it only further underscored the bold

15. 2.7 million households (and 3.8 million children) today receive this benefit.

16. Kozek, Bartłomiej, "Poland: a vicious circle of disdain". *Green European Journal*, 23rd January 2017.

voluntarism of Jarosław Kaczyński's version of the *Yes, we can!*[17] Despite warnings of financial debacle from the opposition, and the concerns of some economists about the medium-term fiscal impact of PiS's redistributive policies, thus far the Polish economy has continued to thrive; unemployment is at historic lows (at around 4% according to Eurostat's October 2018 figures); and Poland has even made it to the top spot in Oxfam's latest index of social spending aimed at reducing inequality.[18]

1.3 "We are not servants, we aspire to *more*"

"Good change" is not solely about material benefits and a more even distribution of the fruits of economic prosperity. It is also about **moral economy and symbolic recognition**. It is about the dignity and pride of Polish workers, families and rural communities. To understand the manner in which Law and Justice speaks to those moral feelings, it is important here to clarify the nature of the grievances which the ruling party has undertaken to heal. PiS's performative restoration of the dignity of Polish people is addressed, first of all, to "the losers of transformation", people whose personal experience was marginalized in the neo-liberal narrative. This appears particularly true of farmers, and notably semi-subsistence family farms, associated with Eastern Poland. Despite the improvement of their financial resources spawned by CAP subsidies (which have partly soothed the distress expressed by small Polish farmers at the time of the 2005 elections, when PiS first swept into government), there persists a feeling amongst those farmers that they were not given a proper place in post-1989 Poland. The malaise goes back to the early days of the transformation. In effect, the main economic achievement of the first non-communist government, led by Tadeusz Mazowiecki, was the plan of economic restructuring instigated by Finance minister Leszek Balcerowicz — a programme which crucially lacked a vision for agricultural policy, and which shattered, not just the formerly state-owned farms, but even the capitalist farms of Western Poland. As for the liberal inheritors of Mazowiecki, in the Civic Platform government, they used EU structural funds to foster the development of poorer regions, without, however, dissipating a sense that their preference was for a model of urban-led development, more in tune with their values. **Crucially, the liberal discourse**

17. Sutowski, Michał, "The 'good shift' – new authoritarianism and beyond", *Krytyka Polityczna*, April 2018.
18. *The Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index 2018: A global ranking of governments based on what they are doing to tackle the gap between rich and poor*, Development Finance International and Oxfam Report, October 2018

on progress, modernity and success is one which country people did not easily inhabit. The grammar changed with Law and Justice's accession to power. As Piotr Skwiecinski, a journalist sympathetic to the conservative view explains, "many farmers have a feeling that the government is, at last, '*on our side*', that they treat them as 'Poland A' and not just as 'Poland B' anymore."[19]

Importantly, the ruling party's language of dignity strikes a chord well beyond country people, blue-collar workers and poorer voters. Polls show that PiS is also widely popular among segments of the Polish middle class – small entrepreneurs and employees in the public sector and the service industry. The Polish labour market presents a number of flaws that can make life difficult for white collar workers, including low employment stability, low wages (and the low share of wages in GDP relative to other Central European countries), an autocratic model of management, deficient social security nets, and the widespread abuse of certain types of job contracts.[20] The previous government worked on fixing some of these faults, notably by making it compulsory to include social security payments in civil law contracts, and by closing major loopholes in the VAT system, yet many in Poland contend that it took PiS for a real discourse on "decent work" to take shape.

The crucial point here is not just the actual difficulties faced by many Polish workers, but the *relative* dimension of their feelings of deprivation. Indeed Polish society has seen a rapid rise in aspirations fostered at once by overall economic improvement at home and the extension of the theatre of comparison to Europe. As Krzysztof Mazur, President of the (conservative) Jagellonian Club, points out, "the PO whipped up expectations. Tusk said that Poland will be a second Ireland in ten years, and so people felt disappointed that despite their hard work, Poland is still lagging behind."[21] These views echo recent qualitative research conducted by the liberal-leaning "European Front", which revealed a distinct tendency amongst respondents to compare Poland to the richest EU member states, and most notably to Germany, and to weigh up the things that Poles working there can afford (*e.g.* holidays abroad, a new car) against the

19. Phone interview with Piotr Skwiecinski conducted on Saturday, 27th October 2018. Poland A and Poland B" is one that is commonly heard in the country to mark the contrast between successful, prosperous segments of society and those who are lagging behind (both materially and symbolically).
20. See, *e.g.*, Wójcik, Piotr, "Witajcie w kraju złej pracy", *Klub Jagielloński*, 2nd June, 2015.
21. Phone interview with Krzysztof Mazur conducted on Tuesday, 23rd October 2018.

circumstances of those employed in similar jobs at home. PiS's response to this situation has been to assert the role of the active state in enabling the fulfilment of the general population's rising aspirations, while also capitalising on frustration and resentment. **One of the great paradoxes of European integration, then, with its corollaries of closer economic interdependency, greater mobility and wider horizons, is that it also creates new inequalities both between and within societies, and alongside them, new scope for the expansion of social grief, envy and rancour.** The paradox is only apparent. As argued by Pierre Hassner, three levels of relations can be discerned in Europe today: strategic interaction, economic interdependence, and socio-cultural interpenetration. The potential for conflict and nationalist outbursts stems less nowadays from the first level, than from the other two, and notably from the interplay between these two. According to Hassner, the key issue is the socio-cultural one, but the way in which economic interdependence is managed can either exacerbate or ease the risk of conflict.[22]

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The government's appeals to dignity therefore draw on an entangled mixture of social affects, in which new expectations about work, lifestyle and consumption, a diffuse sense of insecurity spawn by rapid change, cultural standardisation, and the loss of identity of certain groups, meet

22. Hassner, Pierre, "L'Europe et le spectre des nationalismes." *op.cit.*, p.248.

and feed off one another, making it difficult to discern "external causes from internal doubt." One particular issue nevertheless stands out at the intersection of it all – **the issue of migration, itself multi-layered**. The second part of this paper will show how the stirring of anxieties around the arrival in Europe of refugees from other parts of the world has been part and parcel of Law and Justice's vehement reassertion of national sovereignty. Before we do so, however, it is crucial to highlight the *internal dimension* of the Polish migration issue. Poland's accession to the European Union has gone hand in hand with the departure of millions of Polish people for the United Kingdom, Ireland, Sweden, Germany and other Western European countries. Fifteen years later, emigration appears to have become a source of disillusion for some of these Polish workers abroad, who often find themselves employed in jobs well below their qualifications, competing with (and living in the same neighbourhoods as) migrants from other continents, while also sometimes struggling to organise caring arrangements for their ageing parents in Poland. Tellingly, the constituency of the small far right, anti-system party Kukiz'15 is made up of a sizable proportion of young Poles working in Western Europe,[23] many of whom express their rejection of multiculturalism across the social media. Back home, meanwhile, the rural areas of South-East Poland have been drained of their working-age population, and entire sectors of the Polish economy are faced with labour shortages. In the wake of the war in Ukraine, many of those jobs have been filled by Ukrainians, often working on temporary contracts or without work permits. And while the estimated presence of 1-1.5 million Ukrainians in Poland has become crucial to the Polish labour market, this inflow of migrants from the East also generates some frictions within segments of the general population. Poland's tale of migration, depopulation and disappointed hopes is told by Krzysztof Mazur in the following terms: "In some villages around Krakow, there are no men – only women, children and a priest. Many old people are disappointed: they thought, 'thanks to education my children will live better'; they paid for extra lessons, especially English lessons, with the effect that their children now wash dishes in London. These people miss the connection to their children and grand-children, and at the same time, they see those same jobs being

23. A 2017 survey conducted by the CBOS found that 56% of Kukiz'15 voters were in the 18-35 age category. Many of these voters express discontent with a status quo which, they feel, presents them with an invidious choice between moving abroad to take jobs below their abilities, or remaining in a country which offers them few prospects.

done by Ukrainians in Poland, they hear of British complaints about Polish migrants in the UK, and they think: '*there is a problem in that system*'."

Such stories provide a compelling counterpoint to dominant European narratives about free movement and progress. They also provide an important insight into what Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev has described as the "demographic panic" of Eastern and Central European countries. According to Krastev, the combination of an aging population, low birth rates and an unending flow of out-migration is the ultimate source of that panic, and the backdrop to "the political hysteria against the refugees, who are nowhere to be seen in the region."[24] In the case of Poland, the emotional acuity of this demographic issue is further highlighted by the currency of stories involving children, such as those in circulation about "European orphans", *i.e.* children with one parent working abroad.[25] Another issue which sticks in the Polish imagination relates to alleged discriminatory measures taken by Germany's children's welfare agency – the *Jugendamt* – against Polish-speaking parents.[26] The affair became the object of a European Parliament report in 2008, after the Committee on Petitions received a very large number of letters complaining about these discriminations.[27] That this highly publicised issue should involve Germany is not coincidental. Accusations of "deliberate denationalisation", or "Germanisation" of Polish children have distinctive historical undertones, which alter us to the particular character of Poland as a place of "hot memory".[28] Unwinding some of the threads of this memory and exploring their connection to PiS's current political (and geopolitical) designs is the focus of the second part of this paper.

24. Krastev, Ivan, "3 Versions of Europe Are Collapsing at the Same Time", *Foreign Policy*, 10th July 2018.
25. An illustration of the narrow liberal perspective on such matters (and of its failure to flesh out the ideology of freedom with a robust conception of social cohesion and human capabilities) was provided at a recent dinner in Warsaw by a prominent member of the Civic Platform who, when asked about 'European orphans', merely replied -"people are free to move" -, and then added: "It is better than 'Chicago orphans', as we had under communism. It is not as far."
26. See, for example the blog of Wojciech Pomorski, President of the "Polish Association Against Discrimination Against Children in Germany".
27. European Parliament, "Working Document on the alleged discriminatory and arbitrary measures taken by youth welfare authorities in certain Member States, in particular the Jugendamt in Germany", 22nd December 2018.
28. On the concept of "hot memory", see, e.g., Maier, Charles S., "Hot Memory ... Cold Memory. On the Political Half-Life of Fascist and Communist Memory".

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Law and Justice has mastered the art of attuning Polish historical grievances with the social grievances held by various groups in the country so as to buttress its reassertion of national sovereignty and better push for a geopolitical realignment. The strength of Jarosław Kaczyński's appeal to his compatriots to "get up off our knees" arguably lies in this ability to speak to both the social and national dimensions of dignity. So does the frequently heard pronouncement that "Poles deserve *more*", usually uttered without any specification of what this "more" entails – whether it is better wages, more security, more recognition of the historical injustices suffered by the Polish nation, or a more influential voice in Brussels. As we proceed to look at the politics of national identity championed by PiS, it is important to bear in mind that Polish nationalism did not just flare up from the ideological 'vacuum' left by the demise of communism. As one of the great interprets of this ideology, Leszek Kołakowski, observed, the doctrine of Marxism may have aimed at the eradication of "all mediating devices between the individual and the species as a whole", including the nation, yet in practice "the ruling party felt compelled, in proportion to the decay of the communist idea in the 'satellite countries', to employ nationalism increasingly as a tool of self-legitimacy." In Poland, "beating the drum of national megalomania was usually rewarded; public anti-German and anti-Semitic hatred were sometimes encouraged, sometimes silenced, depending on political needs." And so, nationalist passions in Central Europe did not suddenly "jump out of a freezer" in 1989: "this memorable year", Kołakowski reminds us, "was not an explosion blowing up a sound, well-settled building; rather, it was like the breaking up of an egg, from inside the shell, in which an embryo chicken had been maturing for some time."[29]

29. Kołakowski, Leszek, "Amidst moving ruins", *Dædalus*, MIT Press, 1993, pp. 51-52.

2 . THE POLITICS AND GEOPOLITICS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

2.1 Patriots and traitors

The struggle between conservatives and progressives is one that has run through European politics for centuries. Indeed as Chesterton famously said, "the whole modern world has divided itself between Conservatives and Progressives". In Poland, however, **the ongoing contest between those in favour of a Western-style model of open society and open economy on the one hand, and those emphasising the virtues of national patriotism and traditional values on the other, has become much more noxious than a mere democratic disputation about values, worldviews and policy options.** One defining feature of the contemporary nationalist narrative is its obsession with the "betrayal of the (liberal) elites" and its reading of the trajectory of post-1989 Poland through **a postcolonial lens** usually associated with the far-left. A typical illustration of this narrative is provided by the former Solidarność activist, turned PiS Senator, Piotr Andrzejewski, in a recent book chapter.[30] In the early 1990s, Andrzejewski explains, both the former communists and a section of the Solidarność leaders forgot their socialist convictions and got infected by the neo-liberal virus. Through their media [hear: *Gazeta Wyborcza*], members of this elite also started blaming society for its "chauvinism" and slow adaptation to market capitalism. Such "pedagogy of shame", as Andrzejewski sees it, is a by-product of the status of Poland as a new Western colony.

The belief that post-communist Poland presented all the dysfunctional features of the postcolonial condition – lack of economic capital, lack of trust in its own intellectual tradition, embezzlement of public assets by the new ruling class – is widespread in conservative circles. A neo-colonial prism underpins, for example, a number of the studies published before 2015 by the Sobieski Institute and the Jagellonian Club, which describe the massive expansion of foreign capital in the country as having turned Poland into the unenviable position of "a hub of cheap labour" for the

30. Andrzejewski Piotr, "Changing Ideas: Polish Transformation and the Elites", in *The Process of Politicization: How Much Politics Does a Society Need?*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017, pp. 69-76.

EU's economic core (and for German companies in particular). A paper published by the Jagellonian Club in 2014 under the title "The pathologies of transformation"[31] tells the popular story, also recounted in Andrzejewski's piece, of how Leszek Balcerowicz's plan was not in fact originally his, but a plan prepared by Georges Soros. It goes on to describe in great detail how Soros began "the ideological offensive of neoliberalism in Poland in 1988 by opening the Stefan Batory foundation" as a vehicle for "the ideas of Milton Friedman", and then "sent Jeffrey Sachs to Poland in 1989" to meet with the leaders of Solidarność and convince them of the merits of economic liberalisation. The notion that Poland's liberal elite endorsed the interests of foreign advisors and agents of big Western banks and companies (the so-called "Marriot Brigades", named after the hotel where they usually stayed in Warsaw) is captured by the currency of the term "comprador" in contemporary Polish public discourse. Initially confined to circles of Marxist intellectuals to designate the native agents of European exploitation in the old colonies, the term is now used to describe the manner in which the Polish liberal elites look at their own country through the eyes of the Western hegemon. Indeed the comprador does not only gain material benefits from his transactions with his imperial masters, he soon starts to feel contempt towards the backwardness and atavism of his own nation. In such a framework of interpretation, any liberal journalist writing critically about Poland, any historian 'disclosing' a dark secret of Polish history, is construed as working *against* the nation and contributing to the creation of a culture of inferiority amongst the Polish people.

This narrative of betrayal and neo-colonial predicament has been coalescing for many years in Poland. By the time PiS swept back into power, in November 2015, it found already well-prepared ground for its project of sovereign "decolonisation" (or "re-polonisation"), of which the "purge of the elite" of communist thieves and liberals has been a central piece. The new government swiftly proceeded to push its advantage, by consolidating the cultural, human and financial foundations of its power. It immediately changed the civil service law so as to make it easier to replace professionals with party loyalists. The accession to administrative positions of a whole new cohort of young people recruited on political, rather than meritocratic, criteria has had the effect of giving them a strong stake in the new system. The government also took over the public broadcaster, *Telewizja Polska*, dismissed unaligned presenters, and started running brazenly partisan

31. Wójcik Piotr, *Patologie transformacji*, Klub Jagielloński, 2014

campaigns. Crucially, it also forced through a series of highly contentious (and much commented upon)[32] judicial reforms, first by undermining the independence of the Constitutional Tribunal, which in turn eased the way for further changes affecting the National Judiciary Council (which appoints judges), ordinary courts and the Supreme Court. The reform of the Supreme Court, which lowered the retirement age of judges from 70 to 65,[33] allowing PiS to oust 27 out of 72 of them, was unabashedly justified by the need to replace the corrupt, formerly communist, elite by a new cohort of "true patriots". As early of December 2015, after some members of the opposition called for an EU investigation of the new government's reform of the Constitutional Tribunal, Jarosław Kaczyński invoked "a horrible tradition of national treason, a habit of informing on Poland to foreign bodies. As if it's in their genes, in the genes of *Poles of the worst sort*." **This ontological division of Polish society between two categories of people has profoundly corrosive effects on the fabric of Polish democracy.** Political opponents are not treated as equals, but as an anomaly to be "eradicated." This is evidenced, for example, in the widespread use of the term "pathologies" by both sides of the political spectrum. **Over the last three years, Poland's political debate has reached such heights of enmity, aggression and mutual contempt that the very possibility of a common ground is undermined.**

Language itself is affected – reduced to a weapon of discord and insinuation rather than serving as a tool of deliberation. As the eminent Polish literary theorist (and Warsaw ghetto survivor) Michał Głowiński has observed, terms such as "Polish-language media", or "German media in the Polish language", routinely employed by PiS to describe the opposition media, are all the more potent as tools of disqualification since they play with memories of the occupation, when there was a Nazi press publishing in Polish (the "*New Warsaw Courier*"). As for phrases such as "independent media", they are usually accompanied by an ironic use of quotation marks. Głowiński was one of the first to draw attention to the pioneering character of PiS's discourse and its uncanny analogy with the language of the Polish People's Republic. "Anti-polonism", for example, referring today to any

32. See, e.g., Gostyńska-Jakubowska, Agata, "Time to let the rule of law in Poland have its day in court", CER, 19th July 2018.

33. The European Court of Justice made a dramatic intervention into this battle over legal changes on Friday 19th October 2018, ordering Warsaw to suspend immediately its overhaul of Poland's Supreme Court. Judges, including Supreme Court President Malgorzata Gersdorf, returned to work the following week.

critique of Law and Justice's power, was a term widely used during the communist era. Then too, every policy of the PZPR was "good change", and every correction was defined as "further improvement". The same goes for the word "*lewactwo*" [leftism], today ubiquitous in the conservative discourse, which has served to describe left-wing deviations since Lenin's famous 1920 book, *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*.[34] Today, any deviation from PiS's line is liable to be dismissed as "*lewactwo*", in the same way as the "bourgeois" libel was once attached to any divergence from the communist dogma. That the mindset of "the old regime" should have infused the rhetoric of people who nowadays sport "cursed soldiers" tee-shirts[35] and sing to the popular Solidarność anthem "Let Poland be Poland" is indeed rather perplexing.

2.2 Cultural regeneration

The binary division of Poland between a lesser and a better sort of Poles goes together with an essentialist redefinition of what makes a "good Pole". According to Andrzej Zybertowicz, an advisor to President Duda, Polish identity is based on three pillars: a thousand-year-old history as a nation; "Christianity and more particularly the Catholic version of it"; and family.[36] **Such reassertion of the cultural foundations of Polish identity is part of a wider discourse of civilizational clash opposing, not just Christian Europe and the Muslim world, but also a Central European bastion of traditional European values on the one hand, and decadent, multicultural Western Europe on the other.** As PiS Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski said during a 2016 visit to Brussels (where he was to address concerns about judicial and media independence in Poland): "We only want to cure our country of a few illnesses… A new mixture of cultures and races, a world made up of cyclists and vegetarians, who only use renewable energy and

34. *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder* was Lenin's attack on critics of the Bolsheviks who claimed positions to their left. Written in 1920, the booklet was distributed to each delegate at the Second World Congress of the Comintern.

35. The "cursed soldiers" *[Żołnierze wyklęci]* is a phrase used to describe a variety of underground anti-communist Polish resistance movements formed at the end of WWII, who continued their armed struggle well into the 1950s and were hunted down by the Polish and Soviet security services. Long suppressed by the communist regime, the returning memory of the cursed soldiers has sparked controversy, as findings emerge about the engagement of a small number of those men in ethnic cleansing operations against local Jewish, Ukrainian and Belarusian communities in Eastern Poland. Those dark pages of the cursed soldiers' history are not acknowledged by PiS.

36. Phone interview with Andrzej Zybertowicz conducted on Monday, 29th October 2018.

who battle all signs of religion."[37] In this civilisational battle, Kaczyński's Poland and Orbán's Hungary walk hand in hand. Revealing (if extreme) illustrations of the shibboleths in this cultural battle are regularly provided by PiS hardliner Krystyna Pawłowicz, who has expressed her sympathy with Fidesz on the social media through such statements as: "Hungary for Hungarians, not for invaders! Down with Soros! Poles are with you." Mrs Pawłowicz's Facebook page offers an edifying compendium of Western European pathologies, including: German fifth columns, corrupt alcoholics, stray cosmopolitans without a homeland, deicides and gender theory junkies, effeminate guys in skinny jeans and pink ballet pumps adopting bees, trees and monkeys. Last year, Mrs Pawłowicz sparked controversy when she advocated sending deviant journalists for media retraining run by the 'Father Director' himself [*i.e.* Tadeusz Rydzyk, founder of *Radio Maryja*] at his University of Social and Media Culture in Toruń.[38] Admittedly, such language is an expression of what Głowiński calls "absurd conservatism" rather than the encapsulation of the Polish conservative worldview, yet it provides a compelling illustration of the atmosphere of utter polarisation and cultural clash which characterises nationalist passion in contemporary Poland.

Law and Justice's project of cultural rebirth also entails clearing Poland's history of past stains. **It entails, as Leszek Kołakowski put it, searching for the "blessed innocence" of the Polish nation.** The recent controversy over Poland's so-called "Holocaust law" is revealing in this regard: in early 2018, despite objections from historians and the Israeli and US governments, President Duda signed legislation making it a crime to suggest that Poland bore any responsibility for the Holocaust perpetrated by Nazi Germany. The law has two parts: one outlawing the phrase "Polish death camp", which historians deem a misleading term, and a second, more disturbing part, which makes it a crime (punishable by a fine or up to three years in prison) to blame "the Polish nation" of complicity in atrocities committed by the Nazi. Ironically, in the process of whitewashing Poland from accusations of antisemitism, the Polish authorities sparked a series of openly anti-Semite outbursts across the country. Various nationalist groups mobilised to put pressure on President Duda to sign the law and protect Poland against "hostile foreigners and vengeful Jews". During one such demonstration outside the Presidential Palace, in February 2018, a nationalist faction

37. Interview with *Bild* on 3rd January 2016.
38. "Krystyna Pawłowicz o posłance Nowoczesnej: „Lewackie chamstwo", *Newsweek Polska*, 11th April 2018.

displayed a banner reading "*take off the yarmulke*[39] – *sign the bill*" (which precipitated a split of the Kukiz'15 parliamentary group and led its anti-system leader Paweł Kukiz to apologize for "introducing nationalists to the Sejm"[40] and to observe, in extraordinarily candid terms, that "unfortunately, nationalists in their present shape are more dangerous for Poland than the system.") In a comment on this Holocaust law, Yale University historian Timothy Snyder rightly emphasised that it is very legitimate for Poles to want other Europeans to better understand Poland's history. He lamented the fact that few people know, for example, that the death toll in the failed Warsaw Uprising was higher than in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Yet, as Snyder observed, the damaging effect of such a law is that "it convinces you that you understand yourself." Highlighting the easy slip from notions of wartime victimhood at the hands of the Nazis to present assertions of sovereignty, he noted how, in this context, "sovereignty is the right to define yourself as innocent."

2.3 The power of tragedy: Smoleńsk and "middle-size lies"

Popular support for Law and Justice therefore draws heavily on patriotic themes and an appeal to overcome the injustices suffered by the Polish nation, not just in previous centuries, but also, and perhaps above all, in recent decades, during the process of transition from communism to capitalism. In a thorough and nuanced study published in 2017, sociologist Maciej Gdula showed that different social groups may support PiS for different reasons, but that an essential factor for all of them is the "gratification they derive from participation in the national political drama".[41] The director of this drama, Jarosław Kaczyński, assigns different roles to his supporters: they are the victims of the Third Polish Republic for whom PiS's politics offer a chance to seek revenge for real or imagined losses by getting back at the perpetrators, identified with the cultural and political establishment inherited from the "old regime"; they are the proud continuators of a great historical tradition for whom PiS's patriotism enables aspirations and an aesthetics more sublime than middle-class materialism (in this version, one no longer needs to go to university, succeed in business or exhibit one's European credentials in order to be a proud member of the national community); they

39. Common Yiddish word for a kippah.
40. The Sejm is the Polish Parliament.
41. Maciej Gdula, in cooperation with Katarzyna Dębska and Kamil Trepka, "Dobra zmiana w Miastku. Neo-autorytaryzm w polskiej polityce z perspektywy małego miasta", Instytut Studiów Zaawansowanych, 2017.

are the better sort of Poles, morally vindicated in their rejection of social pathologies, in which are lumped together alcoholism, criminality, elite corruption and all kinds of "strangers", including refugees (middle class PiS supporters interviewed by Gdula often express feelings of superiority over more vulnerable groups, and migrants in particular, be they from Ukraine or from South of the Mediterranean). The orchestrator of this multipart drama, Jarosław Kaczyński, is himself a complex and enigmatic figure. Customarily described as someone who "pulls the strings from the shadows", he lives alone with his cat, does not use email, and – unlike Viktor Orbán – he seldom gives anything resembling a press conference or big policy speeches. Despite persistent rumours about his bad health and much anticipation of the strife his disappearance would cause between various party factions, Jarosław Kaczyński's power as Chairman of Law and Justice remains sweeping: he does not have any governmental mandate, yet he holds a seat in Parliament and "summons" Ministers to his house to distribute good and bad points. Crucially, the substance and magnitude of his power has been transfigured through its connection with the defining tragedy of recent years in Poland – namely the Smoleńsk plane crash.

On Saturday 10th April 2010, the plane carrying Polish President Lech Kaczyński (Jarosław's identical twin brother) and a large portion of the country's leadership crashed in thick fog near the Russian city of Smoleńsk. The crash happened in the vicinity of Katyn woods, where, 70 years earlier, in the wake of Poland's invasion by the Red Army, members of the Soviet secret police slaughtered more than 20,000 Polish officers – the flower of the Polish nation. It also happened three days after Vladimir Putin became the first Russian leader to invite Polish officials to commemorate with him the Katyn massacre, thus realising Mikhail Gorbachev's promise and putting an end to decades of denial by the Soviet regime. Mr. Putin was joined in that ceremony by Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk; President Kaczyński, more hostile towards Russia, was not invited and decided instead to attend the Polish-organised memorial on 10th April. In a stunning twist of history, the entire Polish delegation perished in the crash. The 96 dead included, besides President Kaczyński, a dozen Members of Parliament and representatives from all the major political parties, the deputy-Minister for Foreign Affairs, the President of the Central Bank, the Chiefs of the Army and the Navy, the Commissioner for civil rights and such figures as the emblematic former dock worker Anna Walentynowicz, and Ryszard Kaczorowski, the last leader of the Polish government in exile. The tragedy shook Poland to its core. It seemed, at first, to unify the country, as huge funerals were held in many cities. Soon however, "a kind of hysteria, something like the madness that took hold in the United States after 9/11, engulfed the nation."[42] For Jarosław Kaczyński himself, the Smoleńsk catastrophe became a cardinal motif of mobilisation, a cause in which national tragedy and intimate loss, political crusade and personal revenge, got confounded.

For several weeks in the Spring 2010, Jarosław appeared at political rallies in mourning clothes, campaigning as a stand-in for his brother Lech, who had been running for a new term as President of Poland before his tragic death. Ever since, Jarosław Kaczyński has nurtured a cult of national and personal martyrdom around the Smoleńsk crash, imbued with an atmosphere of Catholic piety which resonates deeply with the old trope of Polish messianism. Depictions of Poland as the "Christ of nations", crucified through its partition between the Russian Empire, Prussia and Habsburg Austria at the end of the XVIIIth century, betrayed and crucified a second time at the hands of Hitler and Stalin during WWII, yet waiting to rise again, redeemed through its sufferings, have been central to Polish philosophy and poetry since the mid-XIXth century. This peculiar blend of eschatological struggle, memory of persecution and distrust of foreigners is found at the heart of the monthly commemorations of the Smoleńsk crash. Orchestrated by Jarosław Kaczyński for 96 consecutive months, these memorials came to an end in April 2018, when a monument to the 96 victims of the crash was inaugurated on Piłsudski square in Warsaw, in the shape of a black granite staircase symbolising both the gangway stairs of the plane and the stairway to heaven.

According to anthropologist Paweł Dobrosielski, these monthly memorials were akin to a para-religious ritual.[43] They had the fixed structure of the ritual, always starting with a mass in Warsaw Cathedral, followed by a march with torches to the Presidential Palace. They also assumed the function of the ritual, in its power to explain the world and ward off contingency. As for Jarosław Kaczyński's speeches at these ceremonies, they were, as Dobrosielski explains, always articulated around four elements, which are all potent tools of mobilisation: Path, Truth, Enemy, Victory. As in the old socialist imagery, the Path is that which participants are called upon to embrace: the end of the road is close, very close, yet the completion of the journey remains ever elusive. It is a perpetual march

42. Applebaum, Anne, "Polarization in Poland: A Warning from Europe", *The Atlantic*, October 2018 issue.
43. Phone interview with Paweł Dobrosielski conducted on Sunday, 28th October 2018.

towards a receding horizon. Victory and Truth are equally fleeting in nature and temporality: one more step is always needed for Victory (freedom, the defeat of enemies, the dignity of the nation) to be attained; Truth is more than technical truth, it has to be actively and relentlessly pursued, called for, fought for, because the Enemy conceals it. As for the Enemy himself, he is a chimera, composed of disparate elements: he is at once very powerful, hidden, and already fatally weakened, fearful. Although Kaczyński does not name the Enemy in his Smoleńsk speeches, he has, in other public addresses and interviews, oscillated between accusing the Russians and blaming the then Civic Platform government for the death of his brother: "I know you are afraid of the truth, but do not wipe your treacherous mugs with my late brother's name", he shouted in a heated session of Parliament last year, "You destroyed him! You murdered him!"[44]

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Two independent inquiries identified bad weather and human error as the causes of the crash (alongside a measure of spite in the decision of the Polish crew to land against contrary advice by the Russian air traffic controllers). PiS and its leader have, however, consistently invoked a host

44. See the video "Jarosław Kaczyński do opozycji 'Nie wycierajcie swoich mord zdradzieckich nazwiskiem mojego brata!'", 18th July 2017.

of alternative scenarios. The heart of this counter-narrative boils down to the basic (and unproven) allegation that the Russians downed the plane – possibly by using artificial fog or a thermobaric bomb – and that Civic Platform officials conducted an inadequate investigation to cover up their own negligence. After five years spent trying to discredit official inquiries, PiS quickly moved to open a new investigation upon taking power in 2015. Bronisław Komorowski, who became acting-President after the crash, former Prime Minister Donald Tusk, and his then chief-of-staff, Tomasz Arabski, were among those summoned for questioning. Whether Jarosław Kaczyński is truly gripped by paranoid vengeance, or whether he uses Smoleńsk as an instrument to discredit his political opponents, nobody can tell. More relevant to our analysis is the fact that **competing narratives around the Smoleńsk catastrophe have profoundly corroded the status of truth and the possibility of a shared understanding of the world in Poland today.** For the most diehard fringe of PiS's followers, it has become somewhat of an article of faith that the crash was no accident. And the fissuring of established facts around an event so traumatic, itself a re-run of the foundational Katyn myth, has also paved the way for a thorough reshaping of official memory in the country. Jarosław Kaczyński has recast his brother as the central figure of Poland's march to freedom, thus contesting the role played by more prominent Solidarity leaders, such as Lech Wałęsa. By doing so, he has also positioned himself as the guiding force towards the next chapter of Polish history, what he calls the Fourth Republic.

Historical truth is all the more amenable to such revisions as this is happening in a post-totalitarian context of pervasive suspicion as to whom collaborated and who informed on whom during communism. The wide consensus forged during the Mazowiecki era around the need to avoid embarking upon a great purge (*lustracja*) has progressively crumbled, even though the passing of time has left few former communists in today's state apparatus. According to the aforementioned Presidential advisor, Andrzej Zybertowicz, Polish people have by now realised the extent to which the communist state was by essence a "police state." The invisible networks of that state, and the manner in which the most dynamic agents of the secret services converted their power into new networks of influence, trading both strategic information and state resources for the benefit of the ascending capitalist order, were at the heart of Prof. Zybertowicz's research

as a sociologist[45] (a cognitive enterprise which he himself converted into political currency, by becoming an advisor to both Kaczyński brothers, and then to President Duda within the National Security Bureau.) **Revelations about the "hidden state", its ubiquitous apparatus of informers and the secret deals its agents struck during the transition to capitalism, therefore provided very fertile ground for alternative explanations of the Smoleńsk crash to bloom into fully-fledged conspiracy theories.** This process was captured by Anne Applebaum in a recent and compelling essay, in which she contends that "the polarizing political movements of 21st-century Europe don't require belief in a full-blown ideology", but that it is enough for them to "encourage their followers to engage, at least part of the time, with an alternative reality."[46] According to Applebaum, the decision to entrust one of Kaczyński's oldest and strangest comrades, Antoni Macierewicz, with the task of creating a new investigation commission has "institutionalised" the Smoleńsk lie, thus laying "the moral groundwork for other lies." In effect, all sorts of hoaxes and fake news have been proliferating in Poland in the wake of the Smoleńsk crash, often manufactured with the help of audio-visual manipulation techniques and social media campaigns. A shocking instance of a government-fabricated manipulation of information was produced, in the last days of the local elections' campaign, when PiS released a video urging Poles to choose "safe local government" and reject Civic Platform's plans to take in droves of refugees. The fictional news clips showed images of migrants' rioting in ransacked Polish cities, with a voice-over describing Poland in 2020 with "enclaves of Muslim refugees", a place where "sexual assaults and acts of aggression have become part of everyday life."[47]

2.4 Geopolitical realignments

Law and Justice is part of an expanding, Europe-wide, constellation of new right parties which are skilfully pushing *a new idea for Europe*, based on the *defence* (and no longer the expansion or pacification) of European civilisation. This alternative project envisages Europe as a bastion of sovereign nation-states, within which priority is given to the concerns of the native majority, and between which cooperation concentrates primarily on the reinforcement of common external borders against the new barbarian invasions. Going against the notion of "shared sovereignty" which has underpinned the European project since the 1950s, there emerges through Jarosław Kaczyński's speeches a return to a conception of national sovereignty as "the real dimension of independence", or the capacity of the state to define and realise its national interest.[48] This emphasis on the role of the state, both internally and externally, is akin to the vision expounded by Viktor Orbán in his 2014 speech on illiberal democracy, which argues that after the great crisis of 2008 we are now engaged in "a race to invent the state that is most capable of making a nation successful"[49] on the international stage, construed as an arena of fierce competition for survival. Maciej Gdula has characterised PiS's style of government as "new authoritarianism". It is "new" because, unlike the old one-party state invented by Lenin – which assigned (political, cultural and economic) power to party loyalists only – it upholds free elections and harnesses the democratic imaginary. It is the people's voice which gives the majority party legitimacy to rule. Yet **this popular mandate is also reinterpreted as an authorisation to rule *beyond constitutional boundaries.*** The regime is also "authoritarian" in nature for it is driven by an impulse to curtail political opposition, institutional checks and balances, and pluralist debate. Importantly, **the aversion to political liberalism combines with a rejection of cultural liberalism**, *i.e.* an antipathy towards the rights of minorities (sexual, religious, ethnic), regional identity (Silesia and Kashubia) and the Western ideology of multiculturalism. PiS's defence of "true Polish culture" and of *Europa ojczyzn* ("Europe of fatherlands") carries certain analogies with the ideology of Roman Dmowski's "National Democratic Party" in the interwar period, which asserted an organic conception of the Polish nation (and which, for all its anti-German fixation, owed more to the German version of ethno-racial nationalism than to Piłsudski's dream of a multi-national Poland). The difference is that Poland was then a state with important Jewish, German, Ukrainian, Belarusian and Lithuanian populations, while it is now largely a mono-ethnic, Roman Catholic, country.

In the process of defending this homogeneous cultural identity against the encroachments of the European Union and the threat of open borders, PiS is

45. Phone interview conducted on 29th October 2018. See also Andrzej Zybertowicz's book, *Privatizing the Police-State. The Case of Poland* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), which traces the expansion of the police-state apparatus parallel to the surge of civil society resistance in 1980s Poland and analyses the role of secret services in the "dismantlement" of the communist system.
46. Applebaum, Anne, "Polarization in Poland", *op.cit.*
47. See the video "Wybierz #BezpiecznySamorząd", 17th October 2018.

48. As explained in Balcer, Adam, Piotr Buras et als., *Change in Poland, but what change? Assumptions of Law and Justice party foreign policy*, Stefan Batory Foundation, May 2016.
49. See Viktor Orbán's speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer University, on 30th July 2014.

also reshaping the place of Poland in Europe. This geopolitical realignment is manifested through a double movement of distancing from the core political dynamics of European integration and a reassertion of Poland's role within the Central European sphere. Poland is an active member of the Visegrád Group (V4), alongside the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia. First crystallised as an intellectual and literary vision in the 1980s, this Group was institutionalised in 1991, primarily as a vehicle to foster its members' collective "return" to Europe and Western civilisation. Parallel to the completion of this momentous geopolitical endeavour, the four countries have also developed cooperation in the economic, cultural, military and energy fields. Today, however, **political dialogue between the V4 largely revolves around the lowest common denominator provided by their shared rejection of non-European migrants.** This rejection can be interpreted as an expression of what Ivan Krastev has called the dismissal of the post-1989 "imitation imperative", when imitating the West and embracing its values (in the guise of liberalisation, convergence, "enlargement", etc.) was for Central European countries the only viable path. According to Przemysław Żurawski vel Grajewski, an advisor to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, PiS's rupture with the previous doctrine of "Europeanisation" was galvanised by the successive crises faced by the EU in the last decade, which were interpreted as the first signs of the liberal West's new weakness: the 2008 financial crisis, the 2015 refugee crisis, Brexit and – importantly for Mr Żurawski (who wrote his Master's thesis on the Ukrainian question at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference) – the war in Ukraine. In a revealing account of PiS's geopolitical perspective on these events, he explains: "By taking in millions of refugees, Germany changed from being a Central European country to becoming a Mediterranean country; now to win elections in Germany you have to solve the immigration issue, not the war in Ukraine."[50]

Professor Żurawski's conversation offers a good illustration of the manner in which historical imagination informs ongoing foreign policy shifts in Warsaw. Poland, he reminds us, has its own experience of a Union – the four-century-long Polish-Lithuanian Union (1386-1795) –, whose history teaches us that in any Union, smaller partners must be given recognition, lest the whole collapses. Emphasising the fundamental importance of political equality, Przemysław Żurawski describes contemporary Poland's predicament as a middle-size state in the following terms: "Poland is neither a great power nor a small country; we cannot just follow the decisions of the big European powers." The notion that Poland's distinctive voice is not given due regard in Brussels, and that European politics amount to "a concert of powers over the head of Poland"[51], is widespread in Law and Justice circles. So is the fear that "multi-level Europe", built around an inner core of Eurozone countries, might relegate Poland to the second division of EU member-states.

50. Phone interview with Przemysław Żurawski vel Grajewski conducted on Sunday, 28th October 2018.

It is in this context that PiS initially sought to revive the old Intermarium project. Developed by Józef Piłsudski and his associates of the Polish Socialist Party at the turn of the XXth century, the Intermarium was a geopolitical doctrine aimed at securing Poland's future as a sovereign nation and insulating it from the Russian threat, through the creation of a "buffer zone" of independent states from the Baltic Sea down to the Black Sea. The idea was to strip Russia of its Western conquests and annihilate it as an Empire by encouraging national revolts at a suitable moment in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine, down to the Caucasus. This region was, of course, that which the Yalta conference allowed the USSR to swallow, providing Poland with an additional historical motive to doubt the reliability of its "big allies". It is important to stress that the "pro-Ukrainian" line defended by M. Żurawski has been increasingly undermined by another foreign policy current within PiS. More sensitive to the nationalist revival of the memory of conflict between Poles and Ukrainians after WWI,[52] this current maintains much colder relations with Kiev. The Law and Justice government has launched an alternative project called "Trimarium" (or the "Three Seas"), aimed at developing a regional strategy of primarily economic and infrastructure cooperation which encompasses the Adriatic states of Slovenia and Croatia, rather than focusing on political relations with Poland's Eastern neighbours. The result is that Warsaw's support to Kiev's Euro-Atlantic aspirations is today weaker than it was under the Civic Platform government.

One cannot but note **the paradoxical nature of the European policy led by PiS, which deplores Warsaw's insufficient prominence in Brussels while at the same time undermining Poland's political stature and credit vis-à-vis its European partners.** The decline of established cooperation with France and Germany within the Weimar Triangle is symptomatic of an overall deterioration of Warsaw's relations with the two continental powers.

51. "Witold Waszczykowski dla Fronda.pl: Potrzeba mężów stanu, a nie politycznych gierek", *fronda.pl.*
52. A revival which is partly encouraged by Moscow.

Since 2015, the PiS government has endeavoured to unravel the close diplomatic ties woven with Berlin in the previous decade, on the grounds that the PO government had turned Poland into a vassal of Germany (for which Donald Tusk was allegedly rewarded by Angela Merkel through the granting of the European Council Presidency). In the realms of security and defence, Warsaw's wariness towards President Macron's plans for a common European defence, however justified it may be, stands in sharp contrast with the efforts spent building an even closer relationship with the American ally, in a country already firmly anchored in the "Atlantist camp".

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In July 2017, Donald Trump received a very warm welcome during his visit to Poland (which took place before any visit to Germany, France or the UK), and Jarosław Kaczyński has made it a chief security priority to ensure a permanent US military base on Polish soil. As Paul Taylor put it in a recent report on Poland's approach to European defence, the leader of PiS "sees enemies and threats everywhere and safety, if at all, only in the tightest possible bilateral defence relationship with the United States rather than in the collective embrace of European partners and NATO allies."[53] This a risky strategy, Taylor warns, given President Trump's unpredictability and ambiguity towards both NATO and Russia. The risk is compounded

53. Taylor, Paul, "'Fort Trump' or Bust? Poland and the Future of European Defence," *Friends of Europe*, 2018.

by Brexit, which sees PiS lose its main partner in Euroscepticism and its ally within the European Parliament's ECR grouping – the British Tories. Meanwhile, the Visegrád Group's united front against migrants cannot hide deep internal divides (Poland being at odds with Hungary on the question of Russia, and with the Czechs and Slovaks on the relation to Germany), which only reinforces the danger of geopolitical isolation for Warsaw.

Finally and importantly, all of this is underpinned by **a rampant pessimism among sections of Poland's political elite as regards the very future of European integration.** The notion that the EU (as we know it) is doomed to failure was articulated plainly by PiS intellectual and MEP, Zdzisław Krasnodębski, when he said: "The European Union is a failing utopia. We were told that European identity would be postmodern, based on institutions and universal principles of human rights, but it has not worked out".[54] Jarosław Kaczyński himself has been described as a "disenchanted Marxist", convinced that the Empire will eventually collapse. If anything, the election as US President of a leader who proclaims his aversion to the European project has only vindicated Kaczyński's sense of sailing with the winds of change. According to the authors of a Batory Foundation study on PiS's foreign policy, such deep-seated "Europessimism" (rather than a mere "scepticism") is a most alarming trend for the future of Poland in Europe.[55] Alarmingly indeed, the research conducted by the European Front among a cross-section of Polish citizens shows that doubts about the durability of the European Union are not confined to PiS politicians. While an overwhelming majority of Poles remain committed to Poland's EU membership, this research identifies a significant portion of the electorate (18%) for whom an exit from the EU is only a matter of time, when membership becomes "unprofitable", that is, when Poland becomes a net contributor to the EU budget ("Polexit, yes, but not now").[56] Such findings demonstrate – if need be – that **transactional reason cannot suffice to embed genuine feelings of belonging to the European project.** In the face of PiS's reassertion of Poland's distinctive place in European history, of its rootedness in the Central European experience, of the place and dignity of those who live in the Polish village, can those who are committed to the European promise offer more than a narrative on the construction of

54. "Prof. Krasnodębski: Unia Europejska to jest utopia, która upada. Ta utopia na naszych oczach się kończy", *wPolityce.pl*, 30th March 2018.
55. Balcer, Adam, Piotr Buras et als., *op.cit.*, pp. 8-11.
56. European Front, *Diagnosis and Actions*, Warsaw, September 2018.

new highways, economic of scales and constitutional patriotism? Can an alternative be built, which does justice to the aspirations for place, identity, community and equality which are mounting across Europe – an alternative which re-establishes social cohesion at the heart of the European project – while holding firm on the four freedoms, on democratic pluralism, and on the reality of our inescapable interdependence with all those who dwell on our shared and vulnerable planet? These are the questions which the Polish liberal opposition and the Polish left, but also the next European Parliament, will have to tackle head on.

CONCLUSION

In an essay from the mid-1950s, Czesław Miłosz recounts how news of Hiroshima found him in Cracow in the summer 1945 as he was working on a scenario for a film.[57] The idea of the film came to him, Miłosz explains, "from the story of a man who, after having lost his ties to civilisation, has to face the world alone – Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe." Miłosz's intention was to portray a Robinson Crusoe of his times: not one who found himself stranded on a scrap of land yet untouched by human hands, but a man whose misfortune was to have to survive in a place utterly shattered by the destructive forces of Europe's XXth century – a crushed Central European city. As he describes it, "once the Nazis had deported all the population which survived the battles of the Polish uprising of 1944, only isolated men, leading the lives of hunted animals, hid in the ruins of Warsaw. For every one of those men, the previous history of mankind had ceased to exist. They each had to solve anew the exceedingly difficult problem of finding water and crusts of bread in abandoned cellars; they were afraid to light a fire lest they betray their presence; and they trembled at the echo of a human voice." A few years later, the film was produced by the State-owned Polish Film Company. The scenario, however, provoked so many political objections that the producers profoundly revised it, without the participation of the author: "Robinson Crusoe is, as we know, an asocial individual. His faithful Friday does not suffice to create a society. So the producers introduced two Fridays, and then again two, until the number reached a dozen, all imbued with a fine ideological zeal. They even included a heroic Soviet parachutist (yet unknown at that period in Warsaw)." Miłosz had meant the film to warn men of their folly – "What is man?", he wanted to ask. "Let us not stop at such vague a notion!", the film directors, representing the Communist Party, exclaimed, "What we want to know is whether he is a friend or an enemy."

One is left to wonder how it is possible that a few short decades later, those same categories of friend and enemy have come again to dominate the political language in free and democratic Poland. As a country which encountered the hell of Europe's XXth century – "not Hell's first circle, but a much deeper one" – Poland is also a country which has given us

57. Miłosz, Czesław, "Speaking of a Mammal", in *To Begin Where I am. Selected Essays*, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2001, pp. 202-217.

some of our sharpest intellectual tools to ward off political Manicheism. It is a country whose society has demonstrated the power of grassroots solidarity and organisation in the face of ideological forgery. A country whose great philosophers and writers have given Europe amongst its most compelling pages on the totalitarian experience, as well as its most considered critique of liberalism – of what happens to man when, having established himself as the source of all value, with nothing beyond him in the universe, he is left to "genuflect before what he has made an object of worship,"[58] be it Nation, Market, History or Race. All the ingredients are there, at hand's reach, in XXth century Polish writing, for a renewed dialogue, in our times, on the experience of war and displacement, on the meaning of our shared humanity, and on our responsibility as ethical subjects in a new era of turmoil. Of the poet Aleksander Wat, Czesław Miłosz wrote that "he typifies the numerous adventures of the European mind in its Polish variety, that is, a mind not located in some abstract space where what is elementary – hunger, fear, despair, desire – does not penetrate."[59] These are things which Wat experienced most tangibly, in his body and in his mind, experiences of which he spoke in his poetry, and then in *My Century*,[60] that extraordinary two-voice chronicle of his odyssey of survival in XXth-century Poland. The condition of the prisoner, the patient, the mourner, the fugitive, the exile: all of this continues to speak to us as we are required to respond, in our day, to those who are seeking "water and crusts of bread" in the destroyed cities of the world, and who are arriving to our shores in a desperate flight from fear and hunger.

"Let Poland be Poland", says the old Solidarność anthem. Yes – let us reclaim the best ethical and spiritual impulses found at the heart of Polish thought, and let them be a compass for our shared consciousness as Europeans at the onset of a new century.

58. Miłosz, Czesław, *op.cit.*, p. 210. For a critique of both nationalist folly and the vacuousness of Western liberalism, see also "Letter to Jerzy Andrzejewski", pp. 189-201.
59. Miłosz, Czesław, "Ruins and poetry", *op.cit*, p.366.
60. Wat, Aleksander, *My Century*, NYRB Classics, 2003.

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THE REVENGE OF THE NATION
POLITICAL PASSIONS IN CONTEMPORARY POLAND

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