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24. Poland. A Fourth Wave of Populism?

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Introduction

The Polish political system has been significantly reshaped since the transformation process in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Przyłęcki (2012, pp. 68–70) has argued that at least three waves of populism have occurred in the last 25 years. The first wave occurred during the 1990 presidential elections, the second in mid-1995, and the third and strongest wave started with the 2001 parliamentary elections. Consequently, most studies on populism in Poland were published after 2001 and relate mainly to two political parties; the League of Polish Families and the Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland. As we shall see in this chapter, some argue that a fourth wave of Polish populism started during the 2014 European Parliament elections, which affected both the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2015. Most Polish studies have focused on political actors as communicators, and less is known about the relationship between populism and the media and between populism and citizens.

Research on Populism in Poland

The definition of *populism* and *populist* is diverse and vague in the Polish literature. Some authors refer to classic elements, such as the existence of two homogenous groups—“the people” and “the elite.” The idea supports popular sovereignty and a Manichean outlook that contrasts a positive valorization of “the people” (as pure and wise) to a denigration of “the elite” (portrayed as privileged, corrupted, and arrogant) (see Dzwończyk 2000b, p. 24; Nalewajko, 2013, p. 52; Szacki, 2006, pp. 13–18). As Przyłęcki (2012, pp. 14–16) claims, populism’s meaning depends on the semantic content ascribed to the category of “the people”—in other words, to the idealized conception of the community (the “heartland”).

Przyłęcki (2012) offers a long list of prototypical indicators of contemporary Polish populism. These indicators include Poland’s political and economic sovereignty, Euroskepticism, a negative attitude toward Germany, anti-communism, anti-elitism, anti-intellectualism, and a positive image of “the people.” According to Przyłęcki, populists in Poland stress land as an element of national heritage and refer to social equity and to elements that imply certain virtues—such as God, history, and tradition. They generally adopt critical attitudes to all actions undertaken after 1989 (Poland’s Third Republic), to the current social, political, and economic situation, to liberalism, to new social policies, and to state interventionism. Instead, they harbor idealistic concepts of Poland’s Fourth Republic and of the “Third Way,” demanding change and a new order (pp. 119–122).

Other scholars offer more complex conceptualizations, but there is clearly no agreement between them on how to define populism. For example, Marczevska-Rytko (1995, p. 26) defines populism as a doctrine that might be reconstructed based on a study of the political parties’ agenda. Bäcker (2007, p. 32) defines populism as a mode of political thinking that might be sited between ideology, fundamentalism, and a post-tribal mode of thinking. Szacki (2003), on the contrary, perceives populism as a syndrome of emotions and expectations (p. 31), and disagrees with those who define populism as an ideology. He claims that populism is

ideologically empty and shapeless (Szacki, 2003, p. 31). Marczewska-Rytko (2006, p. 7) understands populism as a social and political movement reacting to the specific demands of modernization in contemporary societies.

Dzwończyk (1995) takes a more strategic approach to populism. She introduces the category of *populist situation*, which occurs when political actors attempt to elicit support from voters by making explicit references to “the people” and by manipulating them (p. 23). She distinguishes three aspects of the populist situation: a doctrine (a dichotomist image of social reality), social engineering (demagogy, stereotypes, and social myths), and a psychosocial dimension (a need for a specific type of leadership). According to Dzwończyk (1995), the power of populists lies in their ability to recognize the people’s unspoken expectations and to raise them in public discourse for their own political goals (pp. 25–30).

Przyłęcki (2012, p. 23) considers populism to be a political strategy employed by politicians to attract broader electoral support. Besides populist rhetoric, this strategy includes references to the “wisdom of the people” and a division of the society into two antagonistic groups. Along similar lines, Nalewajko (2013) studies populism as a political communication style. That perspective brings us to a distinction between populism and populist rhetoric. According to Mazur (2005, p. 33), populist rhetoric includes references to the wisdom of the people, *argumentum ad populum*, demagogy (empty promises and references to instincts), simplifications, and stereotypes. He claims, however, that populist rhetoric may not be a sufficient condition for populism (Mazur, 2005, pp. 32–33).

Studies conducted by Polish linguists provide a description of a populist communication style. Bralczyk (2003) distinguishes between six features of that style: (a) outright use of general notions such as democracy, freedom, or the market; (b) references to values and virtues, such as dignity, justice, equality, and truth; (c) creating a simplified view of the world; (d) providing quasi-evidence and arguments of the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* type; (e) use of incisive oppositions; and (f) use of hyperboles. Ożóg (2013) supplements that list with adjectives, rhetorical questions, irony, and metaphors. Burda (2012, 2013) and Ożóg emphasize references to the truth as a strategy used by populist actors to distinguish themselves from other political parties. The strategy is used to create an image of a truth defender in opposition to liars and frauds. Finally, some authors explicitly refer to political leaders’ charisma as a prerequisite for a populist communication style. Bemenista (2006) recognizes three types of populist leaders: the people’s leader, the demagogic leader of the crowd, and the populist leader *sensu stricto*.

Most of the Polish scholarship on populism might be categorized either as theoretical considerations or as arguments as to why certain political parties or leaders in Poland should be characterized as populist. Only a few texts base their arguments and conclusions on empirical research. The most extensive empirical study, conducted by Przyłęcki (2012), was a discourse analysis of the populist strategies used by Polish political actors. Przyłęcki examined both the political platforms of major parties and politicians’ selected statements during the debates in the Sejm (lower house of Polish parliament). Inspired by the methodology that was developed by the Manifesto Research Group, Przyłęcki adapted its framework to the Polish political scene.

Studying political populism in contemporary Poland began with the 1990 presidential elections. Tymiński—who was unknown at that time and running a company in Canada—won such surprising support in the first round of the elections (23%) that in the second round, he

became the main rival of Wałęsa, leader of Solidarity (Stępińska, 2004). Tymiński is described as a precursor to contemporary political populism in Poland due to the campaign strategies and techniques that he used (Stępińska, 2004; Przyłęcki, 2012; Kasproicz, 2013). That said, populist rhetoric was also used by Wałęsa during his presidential campaign in 1990. For example, he was appealing to “all Poles” and to the “Polish nation who fought against the communist regime” (Wysocka, 2009).

The second wave of populism, as Przyłęcki (2012, p. 69) claims, occurred in the mid-1990s. It refers mainly to the successes of right-wing parties— such as the Solidarity Electoral Action and the Confederation of Independent Poland—and of left-wing parties, such as the Democratic Left Alliance and Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland. However, more center-oriented political parties like the Freedom Union also received attention in the second wave. The third wave of populism refers to the successes of the League of Polish Families and the Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland in 2001 and, more importantly, in 2005, when they formed a government coalition with the conservative Law and Justice party (the Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland party received 11% and 56 representatives; the League of Polish Families received eight percent and 34 representatives).

While some authors analyzed issue changes in the political agenda (Marks, 2003; Jajecznik, 2006; Sielski, 2006; Maj 2006), others drew comparisons between Polish and foreign populist parties (Kostrzębski, 2002; Moroska, 2010). Some studies analyzed images of political leaders (Czechowska-Derkacz, 2012; Sasińska-Klas, 2006; Stępińska, 2003) or leaders’ communication and discourse styles (Drelich, 2012; Polkowska, 2004). The aforementioned studies provide argumentations about the Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland and League of Polish Families representing *complete populism* (see Chapter 2 in this volume). Both parties share an outspoken criticism of the elites and a homogenous vision of Polish society based on either Catholicism (League of Polish Families) or sense of economic exclusion (Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland). Additionally, the identities of the right-wing League of Polish Families and the left-wing Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland were built on strong exclusionary tendencies toward various internal and external “others.”

Initially, Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland represented farmers, but very soon it expanded its appeal to other social groups that were disappointed with the transformation— namely, to the unemployed, to pensioners, and to some sectors of public administration. The party program stated that Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland is the only party in Poland speaking in the name of all people (Wysocka, 2009). The party credo claimed that all of “them” have already ruled and robbed this country, so now it is only “us” who can guarantee that this robbery will come to the end (Wysocka, 2009). Przyłęcki’s (2012) study showed that about one-third (36%) of the party’s electoral agenda included populist indicators (p. 262). The party’s main enemy was Balcerowicz, a Polish economist and minister of finance (1989–1991), who introduced an economic plan for a radical transformation of a communist economy to a capitalist market economy. The open appeal to populism in the left-wing-oriented party manifesto and Lepper’s charismatic, populist leadership allow scholars to categorize the party as populist par excellence (Dzwończyk, 2005, 2006; Sielski, 2006).

The League of Polish Families emerged in 2001 as a combination of a number of Catholic nationalistic parties that contested feminism, gay rights, abortion, and euthanasia, all of which they perceived to be moral threats to the traditional Polish family and thus to the nation. The party applied populism as a “thin”-centered ideology. The program was based on radical,

political, right-wing elements in general and a Catholic-nationalist vision of Poland in particular. The party developed a list of enemies, including the corrupt and immoral establishment, which was described as the “network” designed to control the nation’s wealth and which was created during the Round Table talks; the European Union, presented as a “devil,” and a “centralized, socialist super-state”; and liberalism, which was seen as a threat to Catholic values and to national tradition (Dzwończyk, 2005, 2006; Maj, 2006). Przyłęcki’s (2012) study revealed that almost half of all sentences (47%) in the electoral agenda of the League of Polish Families was clearly populist (p. 262).

Some scholars categorize even the conservative Law and Justice party as a populist party. Przyłęcki (2012) found indicators of populism in 16% of the sentences included in the party’s election agenda (p. 262). He perceives Law and Justice as an example of *exclusionary populism*, pointing not only at its anti-elitism and glorification of the Catholic, traditional community but also at its exclusionary discourse, inimical to atheists, post-communists, homosexuals, and Germans. Stanley (2012) claims that this strategic behavior is aimed at capturing voters from its coalition partners, the League of Polish Families and the Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland. Unlike these populist parties, the Civic Platform party is almost never referred to as a populist party in the academic literature but occasionally employs communication strategies from the anti-elitist or empty populism repertoire. Findings of Przyłęcki’s study (2012) show that five percent of sentences included in this party’s political party agenda were of a populist style (p. 262). Elements of populism were recognized also in the election agenda of less relevant political parties, such as Libertas (Wysocka, 2010) and the Orange Alternative (Stępień, 2006), or counter-cultural movements such as the national socialists (Grott, 2006). One may argue that during the 2014 European Parliament elections a fourth wave of populism developed, since one of the marginal populist political actors, the Congress of the New Right, gained seven percent of the vote (11 delegates to the European Parliament). Congress of the New Right represents a radical right-wing political orientation. The party opposes feminism and gay rights and criticizes political elites and the European Union. Its former party leader, Korwin-Mikke, is known for his blunt speaking style. He ran for presidency in 2015 but won only three percent of the vote. He lost his previous supporters predominantly to rock singer Kukiz, who gained 21% of the vote (41% of his voters were among the youngest) (“To Młodzi Poparli Kukiza,” 2015). In the campaign, Kukiz presented himself as an anti-elitist, anti-systemic, and anti-political candidate, who demanded the introduction of single-member districts in parliamentary elections. His slogan was “Enough!”

Populism’s roots in Poland are embedded in the country’s history, culture, and economic and social structures. In particular, the Catholic ideology resonates well with right-wing populism. The Church and right-wing populists share a defense of the patriarchal family, a rigid moral order, and an ethnocentric concentration on the nation, including the roles that the people and their traditions play within it (Buzalka, 2005; Pankowski, 2010). The notion of Pole-Catholic was used extensively after 1945 in the conflict between secular communist elites and the democratic opposition representing religious society. Today, the moralizing discourse is bolstered by the strong institutional position of the Catholic Church and media organizations like Radio Maryja (Buzalka, 2008; Dzwończyk, 2000a; Przyłęcki, 2012).

Markowski (2004) distinguishes several other factors fostering populism in Central and Eastern Europe. First of all, in post-socialist countries, an anti-state attitude, embedded in the experience of being under communist regimes, is expressed by the protest against elites, the neglect of institutionalized ways of doing politics, the outspoken criticism of political parties,

and a disrespect for state institutions (Nalewajko, 2004). In Poland, the anti-communist discourse framed the Round Table negotiations between the communist power holders and the Solidarity opposition in 1989 as a rotten compromise or “original sin” (Kubik & Linch, 2006; Lipiński, 2008). The anti-elitist appeals were strengthened by a number of corruption cases, revealed by the media before the parliamentary elections in 2001 and 2005 (Jasiewicz, 2008; Kucharczyk & Wysocka, 2008). Secondly, Polish right-wing populists consider their main enemies to be not among immigrants or ethnic minorities within their own country but in Russia and Germany. The accession to the European Union evoked historical fears in Poland of losing sovereignty to foreign countries (Buzalka, 2008; Fitzgibbon & Guerra, 2010; Kucharczyk & Wysocka, 2008; Markowski, 2004; Rupnik, 2004).

Finally, in post-communist countries, society faces the limitations of still-young democracies, including strong fragmentations of party systems, extreme fluidity of parties with vague ideological profiles, minor differences in political agenda, weak bonds with the electorate, high levels of electoral volatility, and low levels of electoral turnout (Dzwończyk, 2000a; de Lange & Guerra, 2009). In such political and social contexts, the costs of founding new populist parties seeking to outbid political rivals’ promises and claim closer bonds with the electorate are relatively low.

Populist Actors as Communicators

Many emphasize that Polish populist political leaders combine rhetorical talent, closed worldviews, and unconventional methods of gaining electoral support (Czechowska-Derkacz, 2012; Markowski, 2004; Nalewajko, 2004; Przyłęcki, 2004; Szacki, 2006). Drelich (2012) conducted a qualitative discourse analysis of the statements of Lepper, the leader of Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland. The main features of Lepper’s style were a declaration of an opposition between “the people” and the elites, a positive valorization of “the people,” an appreciation of unconventional behaviors and actions, strong criticism of the political, economic, and social situation in Poland, and demagoguery. Przyłęcki (2004), however, shows that the label *populist* is used in Poland to discredit political rivals. The aim of calling someone a populist is to exclude that person from mainstream politics and to portray him as an enemy of legitimate and democratic debate. However, the label *populist* can lead to the consolidation of follower groups around a populist political leader, party, or issue (Franczak, 2005; Żuk, 2010).

The Polish literature offers some insight into two constituents of rightwing populism—namely, Euroskepticism and anti-communism. After studying relations between Euroskepticism and populism, Moroska (2010) and Wysocka (2010) argued that only some of the Euroskeptics are populists. In fact, some features of the populist style of communication can be noticed in messages spread by both Euroskeptics and Euroenthusiasts. The most common patterns of communication were simplification, use of clichés, and anti-elitism (Pacześniak, 2010). Jeziński (2005, 2006), who studied content and style of political communication during the referendum on Poland’s succession to the European Union in 2003, argues that both sides of this political debate used the same populist strategies—namely, developing an image of an enemy and a definition of a crisis, referring to emotions, and providing a simplified picture of reality.

Finally, some authors focused on anti-communism as a crucial aspect of Polish right-wing parties’ political identity (Przyłęcki, 2012). Lipiński (2009) argues that anti-communism, defined as a criticism of post-communist parties and their heritage, has been used by right-

wing parties as a populist strategy. The rudimentary assumption upon which this strategy is based is the opposition of the people's anti-communism to the elites' post-communism. According to the right-wing political parties, left-wing elites betrayed the people in 1989 during the Round Table talks. The negotiations between the communist regime and the political opposition are presented as the origin of all social and economic ills that beset the people today (Lipiński, 2008).

The Media and Populism

The media in its treatment of populist actors is considered either as a neutral channel that passively disseminates populist parties' political ads during election campaigns (Czechowska-Derkacz, 2012; Marks, 2003; Sasińska-Klas, 2006; Stępińska, 2003) or as an active participant, reporting and commenting on political actors' statements and activities. In the latter case, much attention is paid to two ultra-Catholic media organizations: Radio Maryja and the newspaper *Nasz Dziennik*, launched by Father Rydzyk, a Redemptorist priest.

Radio Maryja aims at mobilizing excluded and disappointed people, and promises them adequate representation in both the community and the "heartland." Its audience (around 1.5 million people) consists primarily of elderly, uneducated, religious Poles living in small towns and villages, with traditionalist values and right-wing political views. The discourse used by the radio station is built around two main dichotomies: "Radio Maryja's Family" versus the elites and "Radio Maryja's Family" versus society (Bobrowska, 2007, 2014; Pokorna-Ignatowicz, 2003).

Father Rydzyk and his media actively participate in the Polish political debate, supporting or criticizing political actors. For example, he and his media supported the League of Polish Families in 2001 (Jasiewicz, 2008; Migas, 2005; Wysocka, 2008). The League of Polish Families and Radio Maryja shared Catholic values and anti-EU sentiments (Kutyło, 2010; Moroska, 2010). The growing independence of the party leader, Giertych, did not correspond well with Father Rydzyk's political aspirations, and during the 2005 presidential and parliamentary campaigns, Radio Maryja supported Law and Justice. That fitted well with Law and Justice's 2005 strategy of a grassroots campaign. After the party's successful election, many of its politicians were invited to appear on the radio's programs, where they praised the station's impartiality and professionalism (Kucharczyk & Wysocka, 2008).

Studies on mediated political discourse lead to a conclusion that populist communicative strategies resonate with the news media (Goban-Klas, 2011). Hordecki and Piontek (2010) and Piontek, Hordecki, and Ossowski (2013) found several indicators of a growing popularization of public affairs coverage, such as the personalization of political leaders at the expense of issue deliberations, reduced distance between journalists and politicians (expressed by a more informal and personal conversational style), greater emphasis on domestic politics, and reduced willingness to include experts and their lengthier statements. The findings indicate that the Polish news media, including the main public TV newscast *Wiadomości*, share some of the characteristics of a tabloid style. The only significant difference between journalists from public and commercial broadcasters is their more formal language in addressing politicians.

With these characteristics, Polish print and electronic media seem to be prone to populist styles of political communication. Marks (2003) and Sasińska-Klas (2006) argue that Lepper succeeded not only by speaking directly to the people and attacking political elites but also by attracting media attention with spectacular acts of illegal behavior, including strewing grain

on railway tracks in Warsaw.

Riedel (2006) argues that media outlets use a populist style in order to appeal to large segments of the audience. Dudkiewicz (2003) distinguishes four inherent features of media reporting that resonate with political populism: a utopian concept of an ideal society, a simplified dichotomist perspective on social issues, a desire to bond with the audience and win their support, and a desire to help mobilize and integrate society on key issues.

At the same time, Polish media considers political populism a serious phenomenon that should be covered and analyzed. Marczewska-Rytko (2006) has argued that the Polish media is aware of the strategies used by political actors to attract attention and, consequently, to spread the message and gain social support. The topic has been frequently discussed by journalists with experts and scholars.

Citizens and Populism

The Polish literature offers some insight into the social circumstances that may foster populism. Jakubowska (2004) distinguished three types of populism among citizens: *sector populism* (accepting crusades against criminals and strong positions of the Church and the state), *procedural populism* (supposing that political parties do not care about people and that people do not need political parties), and xenophobia (contending that Poland should not form part of the European Union and that diplomacy should defend Polish political, economic, and cultural sovereignty). Her study demonstrated that there is a weak but statistically significant correlation between an individual's negative evaluation of the economic situation and his or her populist opinions and attitudes. Grzelak (2004), on the other hand, pointed out that a populist attitude affects a person's evaluation of the economic situation in Poland. However, it does not affect the way in which Polish people vote.

Other scholars, including Shields (2007, 2012) and Rychard (2004), argue that the transformation, privatization, and neoliberalization of the economy that led to high unemployment rates and dissatisfaction with economic conditions (creating a perception of being a "victim of transformation") provided fertile ground for populists. Kłusak (2006) explores systemic background factors of populism and highlights state interventionism, the welfare state, and radical tendencies in society as features advancing the support for populist political parties and their ideas. Jasiewicz (2004) added to this list a critical perception of elites and the political system, political cynicism ("politics serving only particular interests"), and political alienation (a sense of powerlessness). Sepkowski (2006) argued that hope (or "lost hope") is another dimension that drives people to populist attitudes.

Studies by Jakubowska (2004) and Jasiewicz (2008) indicated that populist attitudes are strongest among citizens with lower education, higher levels of political alienation, and cognitive problems with analyzing complex issues. Jakubowska (2004) found these characteristics to be more widespread among the supporters of both the League of Polish Families and Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland, and also among non-voters.

Surveys conducted by the Public Opinion Research Center in Warsaw in the early 2000s (e.g., Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej, 2002) provide additional insights. Those voting for the League of Polish Families or Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland were critical of Poland's political and economic condition and pessimistic about any change, while their self-image was rather negative. They believed in conspiracy theories and displayed high levels of

political alienation. Supporters of populist parties are mostly aged above 65, have only a primary education and a low- or middle-level income. Gender is not a significant factor, although, in 2005, more women declared their support for the League of Polish Families than for Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland. The League of Polish Families was also more popular among those actively practicing their religion. The voters for Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland were mostly farmers and people living in small villages, but they were younger than the voters for the League of Polish Families. Overall, voters without a strong political orientation were slightly more likely to vote for populist parties (Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej, 2011).

A survey conducted by the research center (Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej, 2011) offered the following list of indicators (“symptoms”) of populist attitudes among citizens: a clear separation of right from wrong, a passion for easy solutions, a desire for strong leadership and moral standards, a fear of potential looming catastrophe, and a strong conviction that a minority has seized power (p. 3).

Results of the 2014 and 2015 elections showed that a quarter of Polish voters supported explicitly anti-systemic and anti-elitist candidates. Moreover, exit polls revealed that populist actors and their style of political communication resonate well with the high level of frustration among the youngest voters. In 2014, only 25% of voters for the Congress of the New Right were over 40 years of age (“Zwycięstwo Korwina,” 2014), while 43% of Kukiz’s voters were between 18 and 25 (“To młodzi poparli Kukiza,” 2015). This finding should concern future studies on populism and citizens.

Summary and Recent Developments

In the Polish literature, theoretical considerations of why certain political parties or leaders should be characterized as populist prevail. Only a few publications have based their arguments and conclusions on empirical findings. Most of them focus on political actors, and only a few explore the relationship between populism, the media, and citizens.

Each “wave of populism” has so far washed up new populist actors. Two successful parties from the 2001 and 2005 elections, Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland and the League of Polish Families, have been out of the parliament since 2007 (each party received about one and a half percent of the vote). Lepper, the leader of Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland, committed suicide in 2011, and since then, the party has become a marginal player. Giertych, a former leader of the League of Polish Families, withdrew from active politics in 2007 and thereby also removed the party from the political mainstream. The popularity of two new actors, Korwin-Mikke and Kukiz, requires a new wave of research to help us understand the meaning behind the latest revival of populism in the 2014 and 2015 elections.

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