

**Messianism in the Heart of Europe: Analysing Poland's Law and Justice Party,
Narratives of Identity, and the European Union**

by

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DEDICATION PAGE

This thesis is dedicated to the memories of William and Dorothy Fitkowski, and Norman and Alice Klajbor. Their support as grandparents helped me to embrace my heritage, my interest in history, and to think deeply about what makes us connected.

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ABSTRACT

This project delves into the contemporary conflict the Polish government under the Eurosceptic and Catholic-nationalist Law and Justice party (PiS) finds itself in with the European Union. Within questions of European integration, social values, and what it means to be "European", PiS have attempted to distance Poland's relationship with the EU and promote illiberal policies through the bolstering of a historical narrative of national martyrdom and the messianic concept of the Polish state as a "Christ of Nations", positioning Poland as a defender of traditional Christian values. Through the use of historical institutionalism as a theoretical framework, this project analyses how this messianic narrative has developed in modern Poland and its institutions, and how PiS as a party uses these narratives around Polish national identity to create parameters for who can and can not be considered "Polish", and how this development has clashed with a competing identity and narrative based around liberal democratic principles from the European Union.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

AWS – *Akcja Wyborcza Solidarność* (Solidarity Electoral Action), a big tent conservative coalition active from 1996 until its dissolution in 2001.

EU – European Union.

LPR – *Liga Polskich Rodzin* (League of Polish Families), a right-wing nationalist and Eurosceptic party in coalition with PiS from 2005 to 2007.

PC – *Porozumienie Centrum* (Centre Agreement), a conservative grouping headed by the Kaczyński twins until its folding into PiS in 2001.

PiS – *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Law and Justice), the conservative and Catholic-nationalist governing party of Poland, led by Jarosław Kaczyński. Also led a coalition government from 2005 to 2007.

PO – *Platforma Obywatelska* (Civic Platform), a liberal and centrist party and PiS' main electoral opponent in the 2000s onwards. Led by Donald Tusk, PO formed government from 2007 to 2015.

PRL – *Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa* (Polish People's Republic), the name of the Soviet-backed communist government from 1952 to 1989, until its formation into the present-day Third Polish Republic.

PSL – *Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe* (Polish People's Party), a moderate conservative and agrarian party, in coalition with PO from 2007 to 2015.

PZPR – *Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza* (Polish United Workers' Party), the ruling party of the Polish People's Republic until its dissolution in 1990.

Samoobrona – *Samoobrona Rzeczpospolitej Polskiej* (Self-Defense of the Republic of Poland), an agrarian and Eurosceptic grouping that formed government with PiS and LPR from 2005 to 2007.

SLD – *Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej* (Democratic Left Alliance), a social democratic party formed out of the PZPR in 1990, forming government from 1993 to 1997 and 2001 to 2005.

UD – *Unia Demokratyczna* (Democratic Union), a liberal and Christian democratic party led by Tadeusz Mazowiecki during the early 1990s.

ZChN – *Zjednoczenie Chrześcijańsko-Narodowe* (Christian National Union), A right-wing and Catholic-nationalist party active during the 1990s.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

On 11 March 2021, the European Parliament declared that the European Union was a “LGBTIQ Freedom Zone”, a symbolic resolution that in reality meant little in terms of actual varying policy on LGBT+ rights in the 27 member states that make up the supranational organization.¹ However, the goal of the resolution was instead meant to show disapproval at the government of Poland, who since 2019 had supported the creation of local “LGBT-free zones” in the Central European country, primarily in the more rural and conservative regions of Poland.² These LGBT-free zones, in which local and voivodeship (provincial) councils passed bills proclaiming the protection of traditional family values against what has been characterised as a “rainbow plague” by Polish conservatives, continues to be a large political thorn in the side of Polish-EU integration. The 2021 declaration by the European Parliament was also a direct response to the Polish government’s decision to strike at adoption by same-sex couples, a policy closely connected with its support of the LGBT-free zones.³

The reaction by the European Union to these zones in 2021 is not unprecedented. A more direct condemnation was given in 2019 by the European Parliament against acts of discrimination in Poland, urging the European Commission to formally denounce the Polish government, and for the Polish government itself to move towards dismantling the

¹ “EU declared ‘LGBT freedom zone’ in response to Poland’s ‘LGBT-free zones.’” *BBC News*, 11 March 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56366750>.

² Picheta, Rob and Ivana Kottasová, “‘You Don’t Belong Here’: In Poland ‘LGBT-free zones,’ existing is an act of defiance.” *CNN*, October 2020. <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2020/10/world/lgbt-free-poland-intl-scli-cnnphotos/>.

³ “EU declared ‘LGBT freedom zone’ in response to Poland’s ‘LGBT-free zones.’” *BBC News*.

LGBT-free zones.⁴ However, this conflict between the European Union and one of its member states extends far beyond the topical discussion of LGBT+ rights in Poland, and into a deeper conversation around identity, the building of national narratives, and what it means to be considered “Polish” and “European.” Poland remains one of the most optimistic towards the European Union and its future, but the national government has created a narrative counteracting this optimism with a belief that the European Union is infringing not only on Polish sovereignty, but Polish culture and identity.⁵ This contradiction, of a generally stable pro-European populace represented by one of the most openly Eurosceptic governments in the EU’s modern history, show a dynamic around narratives of Poland’s position and role in Europe. In the current environment, these narratives are used to shape a specific view of Polish society, culture, and its relationship to a larger “European” identity, especially those that seem to conflict with what it means to be “European” in other EU member states, or even with conflicting narratives of identity in Poland itself.

This contemporary situation between the Polish government and the European Union was borne out of circumstances around an explicitly Eurosceptic and nationalist government aiming to consolidate power within Polish media and institutions. In 2015, the conservative Law and Justice party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS) secured a majority in both the *Sejm* (lower house) and Senate (upper house) of the Polish parliament, an

⁴ “Parliament strongly condemns ‘LGBTI-free zones’ in Poland.” *European Parliament News*, 18 December 2019. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20191212IPR68923/parliament-strongly-condemns-lgbti-free-zones-in-poland>.

⁵ “Standard Eurobarometer 98 – Winter 2022-2023.” Eurobarometer. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2872>.

unprecedented accomplishment in Poland's modern democratic history since 1989.⁶ The party, under the leadership of Jarosław Kaczyński, quickly began to consolidate power around itself through means of patronage and securing support from key state-sponsored institutions, such as the state broadcaster TVP.⁷ Both attempted and implemented changes to the Constitutional Tribunal and the Supreme Court would send the government on a collision course with the European Union in 2016, and further developments around PiS' social policies, namely its support of the LGBT-free zones and anti-immigration sentiment, would reveal that this conflict extends beyond judicial changes, but lies within two diverging ideas of European values, and the ever-changing identity of Poland within both Europe and its own history.

Within this thesis, my main question is how does PiS use identity and rhetoric to engage with Poland's history, and how does this affect Polish-EU relations in contradicting pro-European sentiments with anti-EU narratives? How do these narratives feed into justifying PiS' contentious relationship with the European Union? This question delves into a much larger and complex discussion on Poland's identity within Europe after democratization in the 1980s, the use of identity and historical narratives in shaping illiberal regimes, and how national mythologies and associations are formed and politicized. This is especially relevant considering contradictory nature towards the European Union as both supportive of the supranational organization but deeply in conflict with what the union itself represents with a "pan-European" identity, and how specific narratives around Polish identity and "Polishness" confront this development.

⁶ "Poland elections: Conservatives secure decisive win". *BBC News*, 26 October 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34631826>.

⁷ Kalan, Dariusz. "Poland's State of the Media". *Foreign Policy*, 25 November 2019. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/25/poland-public-television-law-and-justice-pis-mouthpiece/>.

In pushing for its desired reforms and bolstering existing institutions such as the Catholic Church, this project argues that PiS has notably stuck to a rhetoric and narrative around national identity and appealing to Poland's history as justification for its actions. This rhetoric is intriguing due to how the Polish government has effectively seemed to weaponize Polish identity and popular historical narratives to separate itself from the supposed "values" of the European Union, and also attempt to forge an identity that both emphasizes a nationalist-Catholic perspective while also re-framing European identity to fit these notions of what makes a "Pole". This development has been influenced by Poland's historical circumstances, and responses to it. A major element within the formation of historical narratives towards Poland's position in Europe has been through a messianic lens portraying Poland as a "Christ of Nations", a 19th century philosophy developed during the country's loss of independence and partition between Russia, Austria, and Germany. This theory posits that Poland's historical suffering as a nation has created a sense of martyrdom, and that the Poles' suffering would, like Christ, lead to a day of successful resurrection and independence. This theory has notably affected historical narratives on Poland and Polish identity, especially in providing an explicitly Christian element to build on and exploit, particularly in the context of connecting Catholicism with Polishness. As such, this messianic outlook has influenced governments and parts of civil society regarding Poland's position in Europe, and its compatibility with the versatile and malleable notion of European values.

This positionality has greatly influenced PiS and how it frames its rhetoric towards the European Union. During the 2019 European parliamentary election, PiS eagerly claimed the slogan of "*Polska sercem Europy*" ("Poland, the heart of Europe"),

but it is clear that PiS and those that share its beliefs and views have a differing concept on what being “the heart of Europe” entails.⁸ This historical narrative that PiS associates with, that Poland is an inherently Catholic country with a strong sense of internal unity against what it deemed as dangers to its sovereignty and nationhood (ranging from “post-communists” to the LGBT+ movement) has had the double effect of bolstering PiS’ traditionalist base and the nationalist electoral bloc, while creating an environment of conflict with a broader European identity that champions secularism and liberalism. This conflict has helped to form a unique rhetoric within PiS in how it forms internal identity politics and responds to challenges to its rule. With PiS continuing to find itself in conflict with the EU, both on matters of social policy and integration, a question arises regarding how PiS has used this identity and Poland’s history to its benefit, and what that means for its relationship to the European Union as a member state.

An analysis on Polish-EU relations based on a lens towards identity must, out of historical accuracy and academic fairness, also look at Poland’s identity towards itself and its peoples and institutions, especially the role narrative-building plays in forming this rhetoric around identity. A central part of this argument is that the politics of identity, and the narratives that surround it, have helped to create and deepen the current crisis between the Polish government and the European Union, and that an analysis of this conflict requires a historiographical and political examination of Poland’s history and its identity as a nation, as well as its relationship to larger European identities and claimed values.

⁸ Végh, Zsuzsanna. “Central Europe’s Radical Right and EU Foreign Policy.” German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2021. ⁹ <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep31801>.

The decision to choose Poland as a case study on creating narratives and rhetoric within the realm of the European Union, and its current crisis around far-right nationalism and historical narratives is twofold. For one, it is necessary to understand that every state has built historical narratives that justify their existence as states and legitimizes their governments. Even supranational organizations such as the EU have gone through a similar process of forming an identity that is meant to legitimize its existence through emphasizing shared values and experiences.⁹ PiS' use of historical narratives is unique, however, in how closely connected religion plays a part as an identifying role within an officially secular state, and how "Polishness" has been defined in the present day on material factors that are emphasized to bolster a specific historical narrative of Poland as a bulwark of Christianity, and as a martyr.

Within this space of historical narratives, the role of the Polish government led by PiS since 2015 provides an indispensable case study into how narratives and historical memory effects policy-making and rhetorical arguments in European institutions. This especially has become more pertinent as populist and nationalist parties within the EU become more familiar and engaged with directing the European Union in some form or capacity, with many of them using narratives of their respective states, histories, and mythologies, to justify their decisions and contextualize their roles as states within the European Union, and the goals and values of the EU as a whole.¹⁰

⁹ Karolewski, Ireneusz Paweł. "European Identity Making and Identity Transfer." *Europe-Asia Studies* 63, no. 6 (2011): 935–936. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27975604>.

¹⁰ Balfour, Rosa, Laura Basagni, Anne Flotho-Liersch, Paola Fusaro, Laura Gelhaus, Laura Groenendaal, Daniel Hegedus, et al. "Divide and Obstruct: Populist Parties and EU Foreign Policy." German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2019. 5, 40-41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21237>.

Secondly, Poland's previous reputation as a "poster child of European integration" during the mid-2000s and early 2010s does provide an intriguing want to understand how a country with a high acceptance of the EU as something that has benefited Poland has become, through its government, one of its most vocal critics in the last half-decade. Despite these criticisms, however, Poles remain some of the most optimistic on the current trajectory on the European Union, another disconnect between the government and general populace that further creates confusion in this case study.¹¹ This separation of beliefs on the value of the European Union, and what specifically its value is to Poland in the present, requires a deep understanding and analysis of how PiS and its predecessors in government have framed Polish-EU relations and have outlined Poland's connection to Europe as a whole, especially through how government-approved narratives around identity are formed and emboldened through rhetoric and association.

This thesis is organized in the following structure. Due to the strong historical elements required for analysis, a large portion of this project will engage in historiographical study and the intersection between political identity and historical narratives. The first chapter will discuss the theories that influence this project, as well as those that major actors use to justify their actions and create narratives, for example the use of the historical theory of messianism within Polish nationalist circles. The main theoretical approach within this paper is that of historical institutionalism, and its belief that path dependence and other factors, such as historical circumstances and reactions to events, affect and shape institutions within states. My goal within this project is to expand this analysis to narratives surrounding institutions, and analyse the rhetoric and

¹¹ "Standard Eurobarometer 98 – Winter 2022-2023." Eurobarometer.

narratives that are attached to specific institutions to further identity, play a part in a political space, or use as a signifier of an identity or cause. This chapter will also look at the specific frameworks used to address historical institutionalism and narratives within this project.

The second chapter will then operationalize and look at these theories and narratives in the context of Poland's history from 1945 to the early 1990s, during the communist regime and its democratization into the current Third Polish Republic. In the third chapter, these historical narratives will be further contextualized with the rise and ideological shift and positioning of the Law and Justice party, both as a historical analysis and contextualization of narratives in the party's history prior to its second stint in government in 2015. This chapter will also include discussion on radicalization, populist rhetoric, and how narratives are used to push these concepts in Polish politics.

The fourth chapter will then look at Poland's evolving relationship with the European Union from the 1990s to the mid-2000s, and how this relationship was framed by historical narratives of rejoining Europe, and conversely an emerging Euroscepticism. The fifth chapter will delve further into PiS' role in forming present-day policy and rhetoric through historical narratives and an appeal to an identity of Polishness explicitly attached to Catholicism, and how these narratives conflict and engage with identities and rhetoric promoted by the European Union in the present day, and how PiS portrays the EU through these conflicts. The conclusion will, as expected, analyze the evidence provided in this project as a whole, and provide possible explanations for the current crisis in Polish-EU relations, and what this may mean for Poland, and Europe, in the long term.

Within this project, a variety of evidence and materials will be used to construct the case study and provide context and analysis. This includes the use of academic articles, published books, news articles, and primary sources such as speeches and letters. The material also includes four interviews made with experts in Polish nationalism, Euroscepticism, and populism while the lead researcher was in Kraków, Poland during the autumn of 2022. These interviews, alongside with contemporary news articles and papers, will act as way to bring historical context to present-day circumstances and analyse how PiS operationalizes historical narratives to justify modern policy on identity and Poland's role within the European Union.

CHAPTER 2

Identity Through Historical Institutionalism: The Theory Behind the Action

Historical institutionalism, the main theoretical outlook of this project, posits that institutions are influenced and shaped by events that create a chain reaction. The circumstances that a nation or institution find themselves in historically can have an immeasurable effect on their future. Most notably, this movement is not determined or predestined, but formed by a chain of decisions and factors that could theoretically be changed by differing circumstances.¹² This movement is best understood through the concept of path dependence. Institutions, through path dependence, are influenced by factors and concepts that can compound and snowball, and small choices made in the past can affect present institutions greatly.¹³ The points at which these choices are made, called critical junctures, are periods that shape institutions and their development through the need to make a choice, and then following forward with that decision. These critical junctures are typically during periods of stress on or reassessment of institutions, and is strongly influenced by the circumstances that led to that juncture.¹⁴ Within this project, critical junctures on Polish institutions, such as the Catholic Church, are typically periods where a need arises to define Polish identity and who is included in (and conversely, excluded from) being “Polish” through association to said institutions.

¹² Friendly, Abigail, and Felipe Francisco De Souza. “Historical Institutionalism, Path Dependence and Critical Junctures.” *The Statute of the Metropolis and Planning Reform in Brazil: Analyzing Land Use Planning Practices and Metropolitan Land Conflicts*. Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2021. 13. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep43206.8>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Capoccia, Giovanni, and R. Daniel Kelemen. “The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism.” *World Politics* 59, no. 3 (2007): 347. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40060162>.

Within this discussion of critical junctures and path dependence, the development of Polish identity, and with it Polish institutions, is influenced and shaped by a string of critical junctures that are expanded upon throughout this project. The most notable critical juncture, the loss of Polish independence in 1795, would form the circumstances for Polish nationalism to adopt a messianic lens to identity formation, a path that would later influence another critical juncture during the emboldening of democratic, and religiously motivated, opposition to communist rule in the 1980s. This development would itself influence attitudes towards the European Union and views on Poland's role in Europe.

This development can also be seen as historical institutions and path dependence operating with the assumption that although the movement of an institution towards a specific outcome is changeable and malleable, a snowball effect increasingly limits the ability to pull back from an outcome. As political scientist Margaret Levi states in explaining path dependence:

“Path dependence has to mean, if it is to mean anything, that once a country or region has started down a track, the costs of reversal are very high. There will be other choice points, but the entrenchments of certain institutional arrangements obstruct an easy reversal of the initial choice. Perhaps the better metaphor is a tree, rather than a path. From the same trunk, there are many different branches and smaller branches. Although it is possible to turn around or to clamber from one to the other-and essential if the chosen branch dies-the branch on which a climber begins is the one she tends to follow.”¹⁵

This emphasis on choices mattering due to a snowball effect or future circumstances places historical institutionalism in a position where the study and analysis of history and historiography is necessary to understanding institutions and *why*

¹⁵ Pierson, Paul. “Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics.” *The American Political Science Review* 94, no. 2 (2000): 252. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2586011>.

they have developed the way that they have. In the context of this paper, it is necessary to understand Poland's history both as a physical state and identity as a nation to make sense of why PiS and the institutions that surround it have developed under the historical circumstances of Poland, even well before PiS' official founding as a political party in 2001. It is also important to recognize that these developments emerge from the popularization of concepts, theories, and ideas that have themselves gone through similar processes of path dependence, or as James T. Kloppenberg states: "[This] construction of a new paradigm [that of New Institutionalism in the 1990s] strikes me as itself a paradigmatic instance of how institutions develop. They emerge from a collision between people with new ideas and an already existing world with people who have other ideas already institutionalized in a variety of formal and informal networks."¹⁶ In our specific case study, the institutions discussed are evolving organizations and concepts adapting to differing circumstances in Poland's history and differing periods of influence on Polish national identity. Placed on path dependence by actions made during critical junctures, Polish institutions such as the Catholic Church developed under the unique circumstances that Poland historically faced, and through the continued movement through path dependence, institutions and their historical evolution have been used to form the signifiers and basis of Polish national identity since the 19th century.

This mixture of specific events and general trends in Polish and European politics informing identity, alongside the ever continuing and changing nature of these identities, have helped to create a conflict between the Polish government and the European Union,

¹⁶ Kloppenberg, James T. "Institutionalism, Rational Choice, and Historical Analysis." *Polity* 28, no. 1 (1995): 125. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3235193>.

and an understanding of this contemporary topic requires a deep analysis of Poland's history, primarily since democratization in the 1990s and onwards. Whereas historical institutionalism and path dependence work in operationalizing the effect of historical trends and events on political institutions and ideas, it is also important to address other theoretical approaches and concepts that have influenced the development of Polish and European identity, especially historiographical and political theories that have a stronger influence on relevant actors, and are *used* by these actors to, in this case study, justify and rationalize certain elements of policy-making and rhetoric.

In discussing theories around historical narratives, we must also define the most notable element within the discussed narratives in this project: that of messianism. In a theological sense, messianism centres a person or being as a saviour and liberatory figure to a group of people. This can also be transplanted into the political realm, where the religious notions of redemption, martyrdom, and liberation can easily be subsumed into concepts of national independence and the redemption of the state through suffering and resistance. Coupled with an explicitly Christian philosophy, political messianism emboldens a worldview that posits suffering as to be rewarded, and that fate places a nation or state in a specific position, typically one of honour. Within Poland, this messianic lens has deeply engrained itself to the country's identity and political sphere, and has shaped rhetoric around the country's role with Europe as a saviour figure akin to Jesus Christ.

We must also clarify a separation between meta-theory and second level theories. Meta-theory is the conceptualizations and theoretical outlooks that frame the analysis of this project. In this context, the meta-theory of this project is historical institutionalism in

that, mentioned previously, is the primary lens that is being applied to understanding PiS' use of identity and rhetoric in the present day. Historical institutionalism's more abstract nature works as a possible way to discuss PiS' use of historical narrative and institutions as a way to forward policy and views of the Polish state. Second level theories are not a meta-theory, but conversely, the theories and concepts discussed by actors within the project. An example would be the concept of the Bulwark of Christianity, a historical theory that places Poland as a central part of European Christendom, primarily as a defense against offensive foreign incursions. Although the Bulwark of Christianity is not a meta-theory, as it does not deal with the underpinnings or frameworks of the issues and matters described in this project, it's role as a way to form a historical narrative, and its importance in positioning the Church's role in Polish history is extremely important, as it is theories such as this that attempt to consolidate and analyze feelings and beliefs of national identity and history into something tangible.

As such, both meta-theories and second level theories strongly bleed in discussions and analysis of historical narratives and their use. In many ways, historical narratives are the operationalization of theories and historiographical concepts, and provide a physical manifestation of theory and how thoughts and beliefs on history's role within nation- and identity-building effects policy and rhetoric. Likewise, the evolution of these institutions through path dependence and the role of historical circumstances have a deep effect on how national identity-building is conducted and operationalized, especially in spaces where this identity-building is a part of a collective movement to understand a group's history, collective trauma, and what defines the group through both inclusive and exclusive signifiers. Within this space, theories and concepts such as the

“Bulwark of Christianity” and “Christ of Nations”, in Poland’s context, provide Polish national identity with a connection to the institution of the Catholic Church and a physical form of “Polishness”, connected to historical narratives and selective understandings of Poland’s history as a state and ethnic group.

The decision to choose historical institutionalism as the prevailing approach in this project is based on the strong historical and narrative elements that frame the contemporary conflict between PiS and the European Union. The communicative elements of this project may suggest that discursive institutionalism, with its focus on how discourse shapes policies and the formation of institutions, would prove more useful. However, I have decided that historical institutionalism provides, with its evolutionary approach towards formation of institutions and analysis of how historical circumstances alter and create paths of divergence, would be the most beneficial in a project centred around discussing how the conflict between the Polish government and the European Union has developed through the use of historical narratives and the development of socio-religious institutions in Poland since the 19th century, and their influence on Polish identity.

2.1. The theory behind historical narratives

Alongside this conversation of meta-theory and its role within this project, the theoretical underpinnings of historical narratives and are also important to unpack and discuss, especially in how historical narratives form and influence foreign and domestic policy. In her 2016 article “Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change”,

Jelena Subotić discusses how historical narrative has the ability to effect foreign policy in ways that may seem irrational and contradictory, but within the context of these narratives, can have a deep impact on foreign policy decisions and how diplomats and politicians act and emphasize on this stage.¹⁷

Subotić's work uses the case study of Serbia and its relationship to Kosovo (namely, Kosovo's position in Serbian national history as a failed last stand to Ottoman expansion in the 14th century), but the bulk of the article takes a broader approach, dissecting how historical narratives frame conversations around foreign policy and the goals of governments within this space.¹⁸ Subotić emphasizes that the creation of historical narratives are an inherent building block of states, and as such, create a sense of "a compelling story of where did "we" come from, how did we come to be who we are, what brings us together in a group, what purpose and aspirations does our group have."¹⁹ Subotić also notes that historical narratives also act as a way to process national tragedies and trauma. In her example, the loss of Serbian independence to the Ottomans formed a trauma that contextualized the Battle of Kosovo, and the region in full, as a part of Serbia and its story.²⁰ In our case study of Poland, a similar response of addressing trauma on a national and ethnic scale through narratives has also developed, and will form a large portion of analysis within this work, especially in regard to Polish attitudes towards the European Union and a pan-European identity.

¹⁷ Subotić, Jelena. "Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change." *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12, no. 4 (2016): 610–27. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26168124>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 613-614.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 613.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 616.

In foreign policy spaces, this need for a coherent and consistent narrative often bleeds into what Subotić emphasizes as the ability to “bridge the rupture created by the external trauma between multiple desired securities of the state”, and work as a tool to structure and understand why decisions are made in foreign policy spaces through narrative and historical lenses.²¹ Historical narratives can also be malleable and emphasized and de-emphasized at differing points, in order to create strategies and policies based off these narratives that fit into a state’s wants and needs within this space.²² In our Polish example, this use of narrative as a flexible and ever-changing aspect of identity-building and a tool in foreign policy has changed Poland’s relationship with its European neighbours and the European Union over the decades, and a significant aspect of this is how Polish governments have created, used, and recontextualized historical narratives for their benefit. The current conflict between PiS and the European Union is partially based on this recontextualization under a Eurosceptic government, and it can be assumed that Polish identity, and what signifies that identity, will continue to evolve and change in response to both domestic and European factors in the future. The reason for analysing PiS’ rhetoric towards the EU is to understand how this specific relationship developed, and how this relationship may shape, or not shape, future interactions between Poland and the European Union, and impact future integration.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 615-616.

2.2. Framework of analysis and methodology

In attempting to analyse the wider conversation surrounding Polish identity in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, my theoretical approach within this paper will be with the lens and tools of historical institutionalism, and the understanding that institutions are influenced and deeply affected by path dependence and small choices that can snowball into larger situations and circumstances. Within this, historical narratives play a role in operationalizing these developments and making sense of theory in a physical space. In short, creating a narrative is a form of bringing theory into practice, and to form a consistent historiography that can be used and developed.

Path dependence's role in shaping and constraining Poland's relationship with the European Union, and how that relationship has been discussed through historical narratives and appeals, is paramount to understanding the Polish government's underlying ideology and beliefs around European integration and identity. In short, it is necessary to understand Poland's history to understand its present, and how its identity to Europe, the Catholic Church, and other institutions, has been formed as a reaction to specific events and circumstances that the Polish people have faced since at least the late 18th century.

In conducting research for this project, a variety of sources and material have been consulted, ranging from speeches, academic and news articles, and other ephemera. The selection process for these materials was initially based on my previous experience with historical sources, such as Norman Davies' *God's Playground* and Adam Zamoyski's *Poland: A History*. Expanding on this historical background, I then

organized the collection and analysis of material based on its usefulness in providing either further context to these historical circumstances, or providing a stronger theoretical backbone or contemporary connection between academic works and modern circumstances that are the preview of this project, hence a strong element of contemporary news articles and material from politicians and other notable political figures involved in this conflict between PiS and the European Union.

Due to a reliance on path dependence to help understand the role of history in this contemporary issue, both content and discourse analysis is required. The use of primary sources within this work is analyzed through the lens of both its importance to a larger historical event or theory, and *how* these sources frame Polish and European identity within these historical circumstances, and connect with other material, especially those within the present day. Alongside these forms of analysis, interviews have been conducted from October to December 2022 with four academics in the fields of political science, history, and sociology on PiS' current attitudes and beliefs around the European Union and how discussions of identity have framed this relationship. Analysis of these interviews, conducted with help from the Institute of European Studies of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland, help in bolstering historical research and providing differing views and observations on the events that have shaped PiS' tenure in government since 2015.

Within this framework and methodologies, there are limitations to this project and its scope. The selection of the interviewees, and the decision to interview only four academics, is due to physical factors in planning and managing the project. Due to these circumstances, the interviews are limited by the selection of solely academic voices, and

cannot be viewed as representing a diversity of opinion regarding a general and broad experiences with the PiS administration since 2015 and the role historical narratives have played in Polish politics. However, these interviews did benefit the project through providing Polish perspectives on the content, and including some diversity regarding specific academic questions and observations around the views and consequences of the current Polish government and its conflict with the European Union.

CHAPTER 3

In Solidarity: Polish Identity and Nationalism in the 20th Century

In June of 1979, Pope John Paul II visited numerous cities in Poland on his second voyage outside the Vatican and Italy since his election as pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church a year earlier. The visit was notable for numerous reasons. For one, it was the first official visit of the Papacy to a communist state,



Figure 3.1. In his first Mass in Poland as Pope, John Paul II stood in front of a large cross, draped in a red-and-white fabric with a copy of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, one of the most venerated symbols of Polish Catholicism, attached to its base.

and the first to Poland. Secondly, it was the return of John Paul II, the first pope of Polish ethnicity, to his homeland. Previously known as Cardinal Karol Wojtyła, Archbishop of Kraków, John Paul II's visit would see a flurry of activity from both state authorities and the opposition.²³ In what a contemporary *Time* article characterized as “[...] like a carnival, a political campaign, a crusade and an enormous Polish wedding all in one”, a flurry of emotions bled out towards what would quickly crystallize as a defining symbol of religious opposition to the communist regime.²⁴ The official state response to the visit was to either deliberately ignore or minimize the mass gatherings, limiting coverage on state television while cutting imagery of participants in the tens of thousands.²⁵ The tactics of the opposition, and the Pope himself, was to emphasize the popular support the

²³ “A Triumphant Return.” *Time*, 18 June 1979. 1.
<https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,920403-1,00.html>.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

Church had within Poland, as seen not only by mass gatherings, but by the sheer euphoria ascribed to the (often young) participants.²⁶

During his eight days in Poland, John Paul II himself crafted a narrative within his speeches and sermons of a united Catholic and Polish identity, defiant to attacks by the state. One of the most famous images from this trip, conversely, was that of a giant cross, draped in red and white (the national colours of Poland), and with a copy of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, one of the most recognizable symbols of Catholicism in Poland, attached to its base.²⁷ This image, from his first Mass in Warsaw, cemented the Pope's trip as a celebration of Polish Catholicism and its supposed resilience against the officially state-atheist government. It also symbolized a narrative of Polish identity and Catholicism interweaving and forming an inherent historical identity. In his homily during that first Mass in Warsaw, held on the day of Pentecost, John Paul II stated:

“The day of Pentecost is the birthday of the faith and of the Church in our land of Poland, as well. It is also the beginning of the proclamation of the mighty works of God in our Polish language. And it is also the beginning of Christianity in the life of our nation, in its history, its culture, its trials. That is why Christ cannot be excluded from the history of man in any part of the globe, at any longitude or latitude of geography. The exclusion of Christ from the history of man is an act against man. Without Christ it is impossible to understand the history of Poland, especially the history of the people who have passed or are passing through this land. The story of people! The history of the nation is above all the story of people. And the story of each person unfolds in Jesus Christ. In Him it becomes the story of salvation. [...] It is therefore impossible to understand the history of the Polish nation—this great thousand-year-old community that is so profoundly decisive for me and each one of us – without Christ. If we reject this key to understanding our

²⁶ Ibid., 3-4.

²⁷ "Homily of John Paul II delivered during Holy Mass at Victory Square, Warsaw." The Legal Path of Polish Freedom, Polish History Museum. <https://polishfreedom.pl/en/document/homily-of-his-holiness-john-paul-ii>.

nation, we put ourselves at risk of a fundamental misunderstanding. [...] It is impossible to understand this nation with its past so full of splendor, and also of terrible difficulties, without Christ. It is impossible to understand this city, Warsaw, the capital of Poland, which undertook in 1944 an unequal battle against the aggressor, a battle in which it was abandoned by the allied powers, a battle in which it was buried under its own ruins—if it is not remembered that under those same ruins there was also the statue of Christ the Saviour with his cross that is in front of the church on Krakowskie Przedmieście street. It is impossible to understand the history of Poland from Stanisław in Skalka to Maximilian Kolbe at Oświęcim [Auschwitz] unless we apply to them that one further fundamental criterion that is called Jesus Christ.”²⁸

In this homily, John Paul II directly and intimately connected Poland’s history to a Catholic identity, and even more importantly, connected this united identity to a history of resistance and resilience, as well as invoking the imagery and national trauma of World War II and the Holocaust, and the belief that this Catholic identity, in some form, saved Poland during that period. This message also worked as a refutation of Marxist historiography, stating that Poland’s struggles and identity were not defined by economic factors, but by a cultural force, and especially a uniquely Christian cultural force.²⁹ In ending his homily, John Paul II appealed to the gathered crowd towards action in rekindling a religious space within the country:

“And I cry out – I, who am a Son of the land of Poland, and also I, Pope John Paul II – I cry out from the very depths of this Millennium, I cry out on the vigil of Pentecost, I cry out together with all of you:

Let thy Spirit descend!
Let thy Spirit descend!
And make anew the face of Earth,
Here on Earth. Amen.”³⁰

²⁸ Ibid, 4-5.

²⁹ Kraszewski, Gracjan. “Catalyst for Revolution Pope John Paul II’s 1979 Pilgrimage to Poland and Its Effects on Solidarity and the Fall of Communism.” *The Polish Review* 57, no. 4 (2012): 32. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/polishreview.57.4.0027>.

³⁰ "Homily of John Paul II delivered during Holy Mass at Victory Square, Warsaw", 8.

The homily given by the Pope in Warsaw in 1979 was not within a bubble of John Paul II's own personal beliefs around Polish national identity and its relationship with the Roman Catholic Church, but a popular narrative that provided Polish civil society, and the democratic opposition, the ability to attach itself to a united political-religious force. Elements of this homily are within the realm of historical accuracy (Poland, much like other European states, has had a historical relationship to the Church, if a rather unique one depending on the era discussed), but other elements, such as the inherent connection between Polishness and Christianity, may stand on less historically sound ground, if remaining relevant due to the ability to politicize and use this narrative to engender specific feelings on Polish identity and history.

3.1. Church vs. state

The Catholic Church itself had a complicated relationship with the Polish communist government, and this relationship was integral to how the democratic opposition used the Church as a symbol of Polish identity and civil society. With the formation of a Soviet-backed communist state at the end of World War II, the Church was identified as an institution that could be co-opted and worked with as a way to bolster the legitimacy of the newly-formed Polish United Workers' Party (*Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza*, PZPR), which faced a serious lack of legitimacy with the general population during the immediate post-war years, as the emerging regime was rightly viewed as a Soviet puppet state that was renegeing on the promise of free

elections signed at the Yalta Agreement by the Allies in 1944.³¹ As such, the Church was excluded from initial land reforms in the early post-war years as a sign that the new regime would respect the Church's independence, and the Church was able to create a working dialogue with the PZPR.³² However by the end of the decade, the government had begun to sour on this relationship, as it moved to co-opt the Church and dilute its independence from the state, first by interfering with the relationship between the Vatican and the local church structure by emphasizing the Vatican's seemingly lack of support for Poland's new western borders (the "Recovered Territories" taken from Germany after the war), and later by the creation of a regime-backed Catholic organization, the PAX Association (*Stowarzyszenie PAX*, or simply PAX), an attempt to instill a government-friendly organization of "patriotic priests" into the Church hierarchy.³³ This, alongside a growing distrust of a seemingly independent Church within the apparatchik elite of the PZPR, created an environment where the Church was still a clearly relevant and influential institution within Polish society, but hampered by a regime concerned by the Church's political sovereignty.³⁴

As such, the Church emerged as a sort of middleman in communist Poland, able to hold the ear of both the elite and general public through its political influence, albeit with a sense of caution towards its privileged position. The PZPR used the Church as a legitimizing institution, an already established force with political connections that could

³¹ Davies, Norman. *God's Playground: A History of Poland, Vol. 2: 1795 to the Present*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. 413-416.

³² Monticone, Ronald C. "The Catholic Church in Poland, 1945-1966." *The Polish Review* 11, no. 4 (1966): 76-77. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25776684>.

³³ *Ibid.*, 78-81.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 81-91.

be leveraged into an arm of the regime, and this attempt to merge a legally state-atheist polity with the Catholic Church created a tumultuous relationship. The PZPR, from its inception all the way to its dissolution in 1990, had an evolving connection to nationalist rhetoric in Poland, both of a secular and religious nature. Party officials partially acquiesced to the concept of Poland as a Catholic nation, albeit under the understanding that the Church would be subsumed into the wider regime.³⁵ Attempts to chip away at the independence of the Polish Church took the form of interweaving repression and diplomacy, as seen by the arrest of Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, the Primate of Poland, during a period of renewed repression in 1953, before his release in 1956 under a more conciliatory tone from the authorities.³⁶

Of note is how the Church was used as a tool to dispel dissent. Part of Wyszyński's release came from a plan to dispel mass protests in the city of Poznań during a period of transition away from Stalinist hardliners within the PZPR to those once marginalized in the party, following de-Stalinization across the Eastern Bloc.³⁷ After his release, Wyszyński cooperated with the PZPR, emphasizing to Poles that "Our motherland demands now from you much calm, much caution, and many, many prayers."³⁸ In exchange, Poland renewed relations with the Vatican and reaffirmed the Church's privileges of semi-independence.³⁹

³⁵ Eberts, Mirella W. "The Roman Catholic Church and Democracy in Poland." *Europe-Asia Studies* 50, no. 5 (1998): 818-819. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/153894>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 819.

³⁷ Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland, Vol. 2: 1795 to the Present*, 413-416.

³⁸ Eberts, "The Roman Catholic Church and Democracy in Poland", 819.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 819-820.

Alongside an ever-changing relationship with the Church, the communist regime also engaged in identity-building through a nationalist lens. Although the regime did engage with identity-building as a form of legitimization in the early post-war (as seen with the PZPR's relationship with the Church during this period), it was after 1956 in which the regime began to emphasize a nationalist aspect to its support. 1956 is also referred to as the "Polish Thaw" or "Polish October", which saw the hardliner Stalinists under Bolesław Bierut (who had died earlier that year) dislodged from the ruling positions of the PZPR, replaced by those nominally loyal to the reformist Władysław Gomułka. Although the position of Poland as a satellite state of the Soviet Union remained intact, internal politics shifted as Gomułka focused on creating the imagery of a "Polish road to socialism", integrating past signifiers of Polishness with Soviet-era democratic centralism, with Gomułka stating in 1945 during the consolidation of the new regime that "the masses should regard us as a Polish party, let them even attack us as Polish communists and not as [Soviet] agents."⁴⁰ Gomułka's "Polish road to socialism" entailed a soft separation from the Soviet Union and a bolstering of Polish communist identity, merging Marxist theory with cultural iconography and circumstances unique to Poland.⁴¹ Within this transition, the Church found itself in a renewed relationship with the regime, and a return to cautious collaboration as the PZPR recognized the Church as

⁴⁰ Werblan, Andrzej. "Wladyslaw Gomulka and the Dilemma of Polish Communism." *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique* 9, no. 2 (1988): 149. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1601112>.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 149-150.

an institution within Poland that wielded strong political clout, even through active repression.⁴²

3.2. The beginnings of Solidarity

Identity-building through association with the Church did not just occur within the apparatchiks of the PZPR, but the opposition as well. In the 1970s and 1980s, under the influence of mass protests and riots against a backdrop of economic decline and the increasing prices of necessities such as food, the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union "Solidarity" (*Niezależny Samorządny Związek Zawodowy „Solidarność”*, or more famously just shortened to Solidarity) officially organized as the first trade union independent from the government in 1980, and quickly emerged as the most notable centralized opposition in the country. That year, workers at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk went on strike, demanding better working conditions through a 21-point platform that would later solidify into Solidarity as an official organization.⁴³ The demands of the strikers, led by electrician Lech Wałęsa, were decidedly focused on the immediate concerns of the dockworkers and the economic reality of Poland heading into the 1980s, and contained a mixture of localized reforms alongside broader demands aimed at reforming labour and civil rights. A selection of points below shows this intersection between immediate solutions and a broader demand for stronger civil liberties and labour reform:

1. The acceptance of free trade unions, independent of the Communist Party and of the employers, in compliance with Convention no. 87 of

⁴² Cieplak, Tadeusz N. "Church and State in People's Poland." *Polish American Studies* 26, no. 2 (1969): 17–18. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20147803>.

⁴³ Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland, Vol. 2: 1795 to the Present*, 482-483.

the International Labour Organization on the freedom to form trade unions, as ratified by the People's Republic of Poland.

2. The guarantee of both the right to strike and of the security of strikers and those assisting them.

3. The observance of the constitutional freedom of speech, press, and publication, which means not repressing independent publishers along with making the mass media available to representatives of all confessions.

[...]

14. The lowering of the retirement age of women to 50 and men to 55, or allowing women to retire after 30 years of work in People's Poland, and men after 35 years, without regard to age.

15. The indexing of the pensions and retirements of the old system to the level of the present system.

16. The improvement of the Healthcare Services' working conditions to ensure full medical care for workers.

17. The ensuring of the necessary number of places in day-care centres and preschools for the children of working mothers.

21. The making of all Saturdays free from work. For those working in continuous operations or 4-shift systems, the compensation of working Saturdays through additional holidays or other paid days off work.⁴⁴

This platform shows a politically heterogeneous Solidarity that united through an equally broad yet similarly focused set of demands. Within this broad coalition, the Church emerged as a notable institution used early on to solidify the movement through a common civil connection. This can be seen through the clergy in Gdańsk being involved through two Sunday Masses held at the Lenin Shipyard during the strike. During these events, a wooden cross blessed in the memory of those killed during protests in 1970 and a framed photograph of John Paul II was placed at the shipyard's gates, and the walls adorned with white-and-red paper.⁴⁵ The strike in Gdańsk (which in turn spread to other urban centres such as Warsaw and Poznań) proved successful in

⁴⁴ "Demands of the striking crews of factory workers and the enterprises represented by the Inter-Factory Strike Committee." *The Legal Path of Polish Freedom*, Polish History Museum. <https://polishfreedom.pl/en/document/demands-submitted-by-the-crews-of-the-establishments-and-enterprises-on-strike-represented-by-the-inter-company-strike-committee>.

⁴⁵ Kubow, Magdalena. "The Solidarity Movement in Poland: Its History and Meaning in Collective Memory." *The Polish Review* 58, no. 2 (2013): 11. <https://doi.org/10.5406/polishreview.58.2.0003>.

securing Solidarity as an independent trades union, and the organization established itself as the face of the growing opposition movement, and one placing immense pressure on the regime as the union claimed a membership of nearly 10 million by 1981, representing a third of Poland's working population.⁴⁶ It also garnered quick support from the Church, with Primate Wyszyński voicing his support for the movement's peaceful means of dissent shortly before his death that year.⁴⁷ Solidarity's activities would be heavily suppressed between 1981 and 1983 under martial law imposed by a new military-supported faction of the PZPR headed by General Wojciech Jaruzelski, and Lech Wałęsa and other union organizers imprisoned.⁴⁸ The military junta, much like the administrations before it, began to court the Church in an attempt to garner support for the Jaruzelski regime, but these actions proved futile as the Church decidedly stood by Solidarity and the opposition, and the junta failed to secure legitimacy both internationally and diplomatically.⁴⁹ By July of 1983, martial law was lifted, with the regime worse for wear and Solidarity, now operating once again legally and with its leaders free from imprisonment, set to quickly expand its reach into Polish civil society.

The factors that saw institutions such as the Church siding decidedly with Solidarity and breaking with a history of a more compromised approach with the communist regime were numerous, ranging from the scope of support from the general public to the identity that Solidarity had built throughout the 1980s. Although a heterogeneous movement that saw membership from anti-Soviet socialists and

⁴⁶ Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland, Vol. 2: 1795 to the Present*, 485.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 492.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 493-496.

communists to religious nationalists and the radical right, Solidarity's image tied itself to a labour platform with a strong Catholic aesthetic. With mass being celebrated during protests and the Church becoming publicly involved with the union, a deliberate attempt to connect Solidarity to a historical narrative began to form, and this narrative hinged on the Catholic Church being central to Polish nationhood.⁵⁰ John Paul II's homily in 1979 was an early example of this connection, and Solidarity strengthened the connection between anti-communism and a Catholic historical narrative.

During its peak, Solidarity unofficially became associated with the song *Żeby Polska była Polską* ("Let Poland be Poland"), originally penned in 1976 by Jan Pietrzak, which extolled a specific narrative around Poland's history that placed religion in a central position within Poland's history and being as both a state and a larger national concept connected to a mythologized and legitimized past:

Original Polish:

*Z głębi dziejów, z krain mrocznych,
Puszcz odwiecznych, pól i stepów,
Nasz rodowód, nasz początek,
Hen, od Piasta, Kraka, Lecha.⁵¹
Długi łańcuch ludzkich istnień
Połączonych myślą prostą.
Żeby Polska, żeby Polska,
Żeby Polska była Polską!⁵²*

English translation:

*From the depths of history, from the frozen lands,
The eternal virgin forests, fields and grasslands,
Our origins, our beginning,
Yonder mountains, from royal Polish blood, Krak,
Lech.
A long chain of human existence
Linked by simple ideas.
So that Poland, so that Poland,
So that Poland would be Poland!*

Notably, the phrasing of "Let Poland be Poland" also creates a distinction between this mythologized Poland and the PZPR regime, with the accusation that the current regime

⁵⁰ Kubow, "The Solidarity Movement in Poland: Its History and Meaning in Collective Memory," 11.

⁵¹ Lech is the legendary founder of Poland according to the origin myth of the three brothers Lech, Čech, and Rus', as a way to explain linguistic and cultural ties between Slavic peoples from the 14th century onwards. Krak fulfils a similar role as the legendary founder of the city of Kraków. The Piasts were Poland's first royal dynasty, ruling from Poland's *de jure* formation in 966 until 1370.

⁵² Pietrzak, Jan. "Żeby Polska była Polską." Lyrics Translate. 15 July 2012. <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/zeby-polska-byla-polska-so-poland-would-be-poland.html>.

was not “Polish”, but imposed by a foreign power, in this case the Soviet Union, on the Polish people. In fact, a variation of the song favoured by fundamentalists instead changed the chorus to “*Żeby Polska była Polska*” (“so that Poland shall be *Polish*”), in a stronger commitment to viewing the communist regime as not only illegitimate, but also a foreign entity.⁵³ This sentiment seen within Pietrzak’s lyrics is furthered by a call for resistance, using the imagery of past rebellions and uprisings from the 19th century during the period of German, Austrian, and Russian occupation. Of note, *Żeby Polska była Polska* not only frames its call for action through a nationalist-religious lens, but also appeals to the Polish diaspora which was active throughout the 1980s as a political lobby aimed towards foreign governments to associate with Solidarity and pressure the PZPR internationally.⁵⁴

Original Polish:

*Matki, żony w mrocznych izbach
Wyszywały na sztandarach
Hasło: „Honor i Ojczyzna”
I ruszała w pole wiara.
I ruszała wiara w pole
Od Chicago do Tobolska.
Żeby Polska, żeby Polska,
Żeby Polska była Polską!⁵⁵*

English translation:

*Mothers, wives in the frozen chambers
Embroidered the banners
Slogan: “Honor and Fatherland”
And in the fields moved faith
And the faith moved in the fields
From Chicago to Tobolsk.
So that Poland, so that Poland,
So that Poland would be Poland!*

Żeby Polska była Polską, despite being written in 1976 and gaining popularity in the 1980s, acts as a connection between the nationalist Catholicism seen within the opposition during this period, and a philosophy of Polish messianism and imagery of martyrdom developed during the 19th century. It is this imagery that *Żeby Polska była*

⁵³ Kubow, “The Solidarity Movement in Poland: Its History and Meaning in Collective Memory,” 12.

⁵⁴ Davis, John R. “Some Reflections on 1989 in Poland.” *The Polish Review* 44, no. 4 (1999): 389-390. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25779147>.

⁵⁵ Pietrzak, “*Żeby Polska była Polską*”, Lyrics Translate.

Polska, and the religious connections to Polish national identity that emerged within the Solidarity movement in the 1980s, is built upon.

3.3. A short history of Polish messianism

Unsurprisingly, this messianic interpretation of Poland's history stem from a far older tradition than that of Solidarity, becoming ingrained into generations of revolutionaries and nationalists in the early 19th century in response to the destruction of Poland's political independence at the end of the 18th century. Between 1772 and 1795, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was surgically dismantled by neighbouring Russia, Prussia, and Austria, and its independence destroyed for the next 123 years.⁵⁶ By the actions of the Partitions, the prevailing identity that connected the inhabitants of the Commonwealth, that of association and loyalty to the unique political system of the multiethnic and multireligious state, dissipated.⁵⁷ Whereas the German Lutheran merchant in Gdańsk, the Polish Catholic peasant in rural Mazovia, the Jewish scholar in Zamość, and the Ruthenian landholder in Galicia could before find a shared identity within experiences in the Commonwealth, the political destruction of said entity meant that these various groups were forced to adapt to a changing view of identity and national belonging in the early 19th century.⁵⁸ With the German merchant in Gdańsk beginning to identify closer to Berlin than Warsaw, and the Austrian government intensifying socioeconomic tensions between fledgling Polish and Ukrainian nationalist movements

⁵⁶ Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland, Vol. 1: The Origins to 1795*, 408.

⁵⁷ Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland, Vol. 2: 1795 to the Present*, 43-44.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

in Galicia, Poles within three occupying powers had to redefine and readdress what Poland, and what a Pole, was and defined by.

In 1823, poet Adam Mickiewicz began writing the first sections of *Dziady* (“Forefathers’ Eve”), a poetic drama spanning a wealth of topics ranging from allegorical notions of romance to the philosophical nature of Poland after its partition and destruction, identified through the narrative lens of apparitions and heroic protagonists. Part III of *Dziady*, one of the most substantive parts of the four-part piece, explicitly handles Polish nationalism and Mickiewicz’s Romantic philosophy in the aftermath of the failed November Uprising and the “Great Emigration” of the educated class to France and elsewhere in Europe in 1831, with Part III being written a year later. In *Dziady* Part III, Mickiewicz forms a deeply religious and messianic narrative around the failure of the uprising and the hope of Polish independence through the use of the protagonist Konrad, a captive prisoner charged with conspiracy against the Russian emperor, and whose soul in-play is being discussed and fought over by a chorus of angels and demons. Bemoaning his personal fate and the fate of Poland from his cell shared with numerous other prisoners, Konrad begins to doubt God for allowing the suffering of the Poles, before claiming that he will, like Satan before him, wage war on God’s apathy in the name of the liberation of his homeland and the betterment of humankind:

Now – and I challenge you – come forth! Once more, baring my soul to you as a friend, I call upon you solemnly, attend! No answer? Yet in person you waged war with Satan. Spurn me not: although alone I call you out, I and a nation’s mighty heart are one; Thrones, powers armies follow after me. If I am to blaspheme, a bloodier bout than that with Satan shall you have with me. For Satan sought dominion for the mind, I battle for the heart of all

mankind!⁵⁹ I have grown up in suffering and love, and though of my own happiness dispossessed, I beat my hands upon my bleeding breast, but never raised them against Heaven above.⁶⁰

Alongside Konrad's stated act of suffering for the betterment of his country and salvation of humankind, another imprisoned character later in Part III, the priest Piotr, is struck by a vision of Poland's future while praying in his cell:

O Lord, wilt thou not deign to speed his coming, my people to console? No, they must suffer to the end – I see a rabble: Tyrants and murderers run and catch at him – I see my nation bound, all Europe drags him on and mocks at him. [...] I see the cross. O Lord, how long must he still bear it? Lord, be merciful! Strengthen thy servant lest he fall and die! The cross has arms that shadow all of Europe, made of three withered people, like dead trees. Now is my nation on martyr's throne. He speaks and says, "I thirst," and Rakus gives him to drink of vinegar, and Borus, gall, while Mother Freedom stands below and weeps. And now a soldier hired from Moscovy comes forward and with his pike and pierces him, and from my guiltless nation blood has gushed. [...] O my beloved! He droops his dying head and now in a loud voice he calls, "My God, my God, and why hast thou forsaken me?" And he is dead. [...] My beloved has risen, and ascended into heaven. His garments white as snow, floats down below, and wide unfurled.⁶¹

Both the monologues from Konrad and Piotr show a deeply nationalist and messianic message from Mickiewicz, and one that deliberately ties Poland's then-contemporary history with deep religious imagery. This connection is highly important to understanding the Catholic-nationalist narrative that has found purchase in sections of Polish society since Mickiewicz, and continues to influence notions of Polish identity and its relationship to the Church into the present day. This narrative of Poland as a

⁵⁹ The statement Konrad makes of "[...] battle for the heart of all mankind" may possibly be influenced by the sentiment of one of the mottos popularized during the November Uprising, „*W imię Boga za naszą i waszą wolność*” (“In the name of God, for your freedom and ours”).

⁶⁰ Mickiewicz, Adam. “Forefather's Eve, Part III.” in *Polish Romantic Drama: Three Plays in English Translation*, edited by George Rapall Noyes. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977. 107. <https://archive.org/details/polishromanticdr00unse/page/106/mode/2up?view=theater>.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 125-126.

national martyr developed into a notable branch of Polish nationalist thought during the partitions, influencing the late-19th century right-wing nationalist National Democracy movement, which would merge Catholic historical narratives to popularize initially opposition to primarily German pressure of Catholic Poles, and later Polonization of Poland's minority populations after independence in the aftermath of the First World War.⁶²

This connection between ethnicity and religion would see both proponents and detractors during the 19th and 20th centuries, as Poles attempted to define what and who was included within the nation. Advocates of National Democracy, such as chief ideologue Roman Dmowski, envisioned a firm centralized nation-state that saw a homogenous Polish state as the ideal, and the collapse of the Commonwealth being brought on by a tradition of tolerance towards its minority groups.⁶³ It is worthy to note that in his earlier writings, Dmowski himself distrusted the Catholic Church, instead viewing Poland as a physical and not spiritual concept, and denouncing Mickiewicz as overtly romantic. However, by 1927, in writing his treatise *Kościół, Naród i Państwo* ("Church, Nation, and State"), he had developed a strong adherence to Poland being a Catholic nation:

"Catholicism is not a supplement to Polishness; it is somehow rooted in its very existence and to an important extent it even forms its existence. The attempt to separate Catholicism from Polishness in Poland, cutting off the nation from religion and Church, would mean destroying the very existence

⁶² Jones, Elizabeth B. "The Rural 'Social Ladder': Internal Colonization, Germanization and Civilizing Missions in the German Empire." *Geschichte Und Gesellschaft* 40, no. 4 (2014): 457. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24368716>.

⁶³ Porter, Brian A. "Who Is a Pole and Where Is Poland? Territory and Nation in the Rhetoric of Polish National Democracy before 1905." *Slavic Review* 51, no. 4 (1992): 640. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2500129>.

of the nation. The Polish State is a Catholic State. This is not because the vast majority of its inhabitants are Catholics or because of the percentage of Catholics. From our point of view, Poland is Catholic in the full sense of the word, because we are a national state, and our people is a Catholic people".⁶⁴

Although National Democracy as a distinct political movement was extinguished after the end of World War II and the creation of the People's Republic, the connection between the Roman Catholic Church and Polish identity remained strong, as seen through the use of the Church both by communist authorities and numerous factions of the Solidarity movement in order to provide legitimacy after the war and during the transition of democratic rule. It is this environment in the 1980s and early 1990s, of a growing attempt to connect Polish political independence and Polish identity to Roman Catholicism and the Church, that the majority of Poland's current political elite emerged and developed their beliefs on Polish democracy. It is through this connective thread that Mickiewicz's musings on Polish independence, the communist regime's uneasy détente with the Church, Pope John Paul II's homily, and Solidarity's adoption of religious symbolism and historical narratives connecting it to the Church form a strong historical narrative of what makes Poland inherently Polish. This narrative would become even stronger as a political tool and theory throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s.

3.4. The end of the People's Republic

In 1989, the PZPR under General Wojciech Jaruzelski, facing mass demonstrations and with Solidarity now established as the primary opposition platform, fell to public

⁶⁴ Dwomski, Roman. *Kościół, naród i państwo*. Warsaw: Obozu Wielkiej Polski, 1927. 25. <http://dlibra.umcs.lublin.pl/dlibra/doccontent?id=13756>.

pressure and announced negotiations with Solidarity would take place.⁶⁵ Over two months between February and April 1989, these round table talks would legalize Solidarity and other non-government-supported trades unions, call for new semi-free elections to a reformed bicameral parliament, and restore the position of President, with General Jaruzelski taking up the position until an election could be conducted.⁶⁶ Many of the emerging Polish political class of the 1990s onwards would be present at these negotiations, and their individual experiences with the “Round Table Agreement” would come to shape their beliefs in the new Polish democracy. Alongside Jaruzelski and Lech Wałęsa, in attendance were twins Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński, who had risen up the ranks of Solidarity and its sister organizations to positions of relevance, with Lech acting as an advisor to Wałęsa and the Solidarity Citizens’ Committee (the explicit political arm of the trades union), and Jarosław as the executive editor of the opposition magazine *Tygodnik Solidarność*.

In June 1989, the Solidarity Citizens’ Committee exceeded expectations in the semi-free elections, winning all the openly contested seats in the Sejm (equaling 35% of the lower house), and all but one seat in the newly created 100-seat Senate.⁶⁷ Off this resounding victory, Solidarity was able to secure Tadeusz Mazowiecki as Prime Minister of a transitional all-party government, which would lead to a fully free and democratic parliamentary election in October 1991. Lech Wałęsa’s victory in winning the

⁶⁵ Traynor, Ian. “Polish round table talks – archive, 1989.” *The Guardian*, February 6, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/from-the-archive-blog/2019/feb/06/polish-round-table-talks-1989>.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Pachocinski, Ryszard. “Solidarity after 1989 national election in Poland.” *International Journal on World Peace* 6, no. 3 (1989): 75. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20751380>.

Presidency in December 1990 further led to a sense that the political movement borne out of the trade union would emerge as the dominant force in a rapidly democratizing environment.⁶⁸ However, Solidarity's electoral victories would be quick and fleeting.

Now in a position of power, ideological splits and disagreements marred the run-up to the 1991 parliamentary elections. Prime Minister Mazowiecki's position that a "thick line" („gruba kreska") should separate the former communist regime and the new liberal democratic government was a controversial decision within the Solidarity camp. Mazowiecki and his ilk believed that the existing state apparatus, including its class of educated apparatchiks, could be subsumed and integrated into the new political environment.⁶⁹ Opponents to this, including the Kaczyński twins, believed that the communist elite had through the Round Table Agreement secured themselves immunity from legal retribution and justice, and that the government's unwillingness to pursue lustration, or the active shunning and marginalization of former communist members, was a sign that the communist elite had retained power and influence within the new democratic system.⁷⁰ An even more radical approach argued the fledgling Third Polish Republic was illegitimate and corrupted by post-communists.

⁶⁸ Pienkos, Donald E. "Interesting Times: Polish Politics and Elections, 1989-2001." *The Polish Review* 46, no. 4 (2001): 432. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25779293>.

⁶⁹ Misztal, Barbara A. "How Not to Deal with the Past: Lustration in Poland." *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes De Sociologie / Europäisches Archiv Für Soziologie* 40, no. 1 (1999): 34. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23997336>.

⁷⁰ Lewis, Paul G. "Political Institutionalisation and Party Development in Post-Communist Poland." *Europe-Asia Studies* 46, no. 5 (1994): 780. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/152951>.

In the wake of these severe disagreements, the political arm of Solidarity disintegrated in 1991 into numerous competing camps.⁷¹ Supporters of Prime Minister Mazowiecki would found the liberal Christian democratic Democratic Union (*Unia Demokratyczna*, UD), while the Kaczyńskis would attempt to consolidate the moderate conservative factions under their Centre Agreement (*Porozumienie Centrum*, PC). The more explicit Catholic-nationalist sections of Solidarity would create and join a number of organizations, key among them the Christian National Union (*Zjednoczenie Chrześcijańsko-Narodowe*, ZChN), while the left-wing of the Solidarity movement, despite forming its own parties and organizations, would gradually end up in the sphere of or enveloped wholly by the Left Democratic Alliance (*Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej*, SLD), the direct successor to the PZPR and the dominant force on the Polish left from democratization until the mid-2000s.

Historical institutionalism and the concepts of critical junctures and path dependence help to understand the development of Polish nationalism and its relationship to the Church after the Partitions and into Poland's current modern-day circumstances. Borne out of a need to clarify and bolster Polish identity in the face of repression, Adam Mickiewicz's messianic concept of the "Christ of Nations" is a critical juncture in the development of Polish identity and its connection to religious institutions. The succeeding decades, through path dependence, strengthened this relationship through the association of the Church as a protector of Polish culture and, in the post-war era, the growing use of the Church and Catholicism as a facet in opposition to the communist state. Within this, the messianic concept of the "Christ of Nations" was

⁷¹ Ibid., 783.

recontextualized to promote a Polish identity that separated itself from the state, and influenced how the opposition connected to historical narratives that viewed Poland as a martyr, and victim of historical circumstance, and destined to become a saviour of Catholic values and identity once regaining its independence from the Eastern Bloc.

With the emergence of a nascent political environment of a divided Solidarity camp against a relatively united left under the reformed SLD, the 1990s would prove a period of reconstruction and identity-building, with successive Polish governments looking to the European Union as a way to “re-join” the West, with the Catholic Church in a position to greatly influence this transition to democracy, and conversations within this new Third Polish Republic. Within this consensus and division, a party would emerge, one that would promote a Catholic Poland within an enlarged European Union, only to question its own convictions as these wants became reality.

CHAPTER 4

A New Poland: PiS' Evolution as a Political and Ideological Actor

In discussing the formation and early years of Law and Justice, we must define and discuss of role of populist rhetoric within the party, and within Polish politics during this period. A notable element regarding this conversation comes from Sophia Hunger and Fred Paxton's 2021 article "What's in a Buzzword? A Systematic Review of the State of Populism Research in Political Science", in which the researchers discuss the rising popularity of studying populism, and what the definition of "populism" means as an ideological stance with so many diverging notions and elements in differing contexts.⁷² In their conclusions, Hunger and Paxton conclude that "populism", as an ideology on its own, does not actually exist. Instead, populism is being conflated for other factors in the studies and papers they analyzed, especially ideological positions that may be influenced by populist rhetoric, but are in fact still separate concepts.⁷³ From this, Hunger and Paxton believe that populism, if it is not an ideology, is instead a rhetorical tool that amplifies "host ideologies" through a certain lens, namely by the creation of a divide between the "elite" and "people".⁷⁴ In our specific case study of Poland, PiS' main "host ideology" underpinnings as a national conservative and Catholic-nationalist party are amplified through a populist megaphone to denote its supporters as "the people" and those against its policies and governance as "the elite" or "anti-Polish". In

⁷² Hunger, Sophia, and Fred Paxton. "What's in a Buzzword? A Systematic Review of the State of Populism Research in Political Science." *Political Science Research and Methods*, 2021, 13-14. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/political-science-research-and-methods/article/whats-in-a-buzzword-a-systematic-review-of-the-state-of-populism-research-in-political-science/D9CD5E7E13DFA30FD05D41F32E6C122B>.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 8, 10.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 1-2, 14.

this way, PiS has successfully used populist rhetoric in defining its platform to voters, as well as creating and exploiting cleavages in Polish society through this rhetoric. Although Hunger and Paxton's deductions may not fit all case studies, in this context of Poland, where populism is clearly used as a tool to voice stronger ideological concepts of nationalism, traditional Catholicism, and increasingly a disagreement with liberal democracy, this approach of studying "host ideologies" through populism as a rhetorical lens may help in understanding PiS' use of rhetoric and defining who are its allies and enemies, even in the party's early days.

PiS' relationship to Polish nationalism and its use as a tool to define itself in European spaces, and differentiate itself from other European governments, is a central pillar in understanding PiS' current *raison d'être* as both a governing party and a physical entity using popular Polish historical narratives to its own advantages (and even to its disadvantages, although this may be debated by PiS itself). The party's connection to messianic narratives around Poland's role in Europe, its evolving relationship to the European Union, and its growing use of populist rhetoric to exploit existing cleavages in Polish society are present from the party's beginnings, even before its formation as a political grouping.

4.1. Early PiS and first government: 1989 to 2007

In 1989, Poland found itself in both a period of consensus and fragmentation. With the old communist regime swept aside, liberal democracy was victorious, and the country was on the road to reintegration with the rest of Europe after forty years behind the Iron Curtain. Of course, this narrative was favoured by the supporters of Tadeusz Mazowiecki, liberals, and the SLD. For them, Poland was successful in creating a thick

line and moving forward towards Brussels. For others, however, the Round Table Agreement that defined the negotiations that brought down the Polish People's Republic was at best unfinished and, at worst, fraudulent. The matter of lustration was left unanswered, post-communist apparatchiks remained in positions of government and public service, and Poland's relationship to the Church, albeit strong, seemed precarious as secularizing forces remained powerful. It was within this space that rejected Mazowiecki's "thick line" in favour of an alternative narratives that Jarosław and Lech Kaczyński found their opening.

As twins who found success in the Solidarity movement, the Kaczyński brothers became opponents to the concept of the "thick line" after witnessing the Round Table Agreement. According to them, it was the communist government that found itself in a position to protect its assets and personal power during the negotiations, and the democratization process had allowed post-communists to stop lustration efforts and create a new system that benefited them financially.⁷⁵ Representing a moderate conservative element of this narrative, one that did hold fears of the corrupting influence of post-communists while not damning the entire Polish governmental system, the Kaczyńskis founded the Centre Agreement (*Porozumienie Centrum*, PC) party in 1990, with an ideological position around conservatism, anti-communism, a cautious pro-Europeanism, and social market economics.⁷⁶ However, Centre Agreement failed to pass the newly-introduced 5% threshold in 1993, losing all of its representation in the *Sejm*.

⁷⁵ Szczerbiak, Aleks. "Dealing with the Communist Past or the Politics of the Present? Lustration in Post-Communist Poland." *Europe-Asia Studies* 54, no. 4 (2002): 557. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/826424>.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

The party remained hobbled for the rest of the 1990s, only returning to the *Sejm* in 1997 through cooperation with other moderate conservative forces in the broad Solidarity Electoral Action alliance (*Akcja Wyborcza Solidarność*, AWS), which was able to form a coalition government. AWS' tenure oversaw a slew of setbacks, including the slowing of negotiations with European representatives after the Prodi Commission in 1999 revealed the Polish government had done little to stem corruption since democratization, and internal bickering and botched reforms led to the electoral alliance's decline heading into the 2001 parliamentary elections.⁷⁷ However, Lech Kaczyński found personal success and support as Minister of Justice and Public Prosecutor General from 2000 to 2001, and that year the Kaczyński twins reformed Centre Agreement into a party with a broader support base, naming the new project Law and Justice, capitalizing on Lech's perceived strength fighting against corruption.⁷⁸

In the 2001 parliamentary election, Polish politics once again faced a reconfiguration. The SLD, banking off the failures of the AWS-led coalition, swept the *Sejm* with 41.0% of the vote (at that time considered a landmark victory) and quickly formed a government with the agrarian Polish People's Party. PiS itself garnered a respectable 9.5% of the vote and 44 seats, a strong position for a new party.⁷⁹ Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska*, PO), a new liberal conservative group that, much like PiS, split from factions within AWS (in this case, the alliance's economically liberal wing), gained 12.7% and the position of main opposition party. But it was the inclusion

⁷⁷ Taras, "Poland's Accession into the European Union: Parties, Policies and Paradoxes", 10-11.

⁷⁸ Millard, Frances. "Poland's Politics and the Travails of Transition after 2001: The 2005 Elections." *Europe-Asia Studies* 58, no. 7 (2006): 1013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20451286>.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 1015.

of two new parties within the 2001 election that would have notable consequences for the future of Poland's relationship with the European Union. Both the Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland (*Samoobrona Rzeczpospolitej Polskiej*, or simply Samoobrona), a populist agrarian group surrounding farmer Andrzej Lepper, and the League of Polish Families (*Liga Polskich Rodzin*, LPR), a hardline Catholic-nationalist party founded as a successor to the interwar National Democracy movement, emerged as Eurosceptic parties that could garner enough support to gain parliamentary representation.⁸⁰

The success of Samoobrona and LPR in breaking into parliamentary politics showed a shifting attitude towards the European Union at the tail-end of Poland's negotiations. Whereas pro-European sentiment remained dominant throughout the early 2000s, Eurosceptic politics were being considered more openly as the position of Poland within the EU moved from an euphoric want of the political elite to an ever-increasing reality, and with that came questions of how Poland would operate within the larger organization.⁸¹ Within this space, PiS remained moderately pro-European through the stance that accession and integration would provide large economic benefits, but was reluctant on the socially liberal tendencies of European elites, and positioned itself as favourable to a "Europe of nations", as opposed to increased federalism.⁸² This specific stance would be muted in the early years of PiS' existence, as the party still supported Poland's integration into the EU, and in 2003 actively supported the referendum on European membership (a vote which saw even the more openly Eurosceptic Samoobrona

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Surwillo, Izabela, Karen Henderson, and Gabriella Lazaridis. "Between Euroscepticism and Eurosupport: The Attitudes of Urban and Rural Populations in Poland 2000–2008." *Europe-Asia Studies* 62, no. 9 (2010): 1507. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25764697>.

⁸² Ibid., 1515.

take a neutral position, with the LPR being the only major party to actively campaign against membership).⁸³ Poland would later officially join the European Union on 1 May 2004, alongside nine other countries.

PiS' position as a moderate and socially conservative "Eurorealist" grouping with concerns over "post-communist" influence on Polish institutions and personal connections to the Catholic Church, inherited from its predecessor Centre Agreement, would quickly change and be re-contextualized by the 2005 parliamentary and presidential elections. After allying with Civic Platform for the 2002 local elections, the aftermath of a slew of scandals brought the SLD-led government towards collapse, seeing the government that finally brought Poland into the EU relegated to a minor political force.⁸⁴ In its place, PiS and Civic Platform emerged as the two parties most likely to form government, with a strong possibility both would enter a coalition with each other.⁸⁵

The opposite occurred. The September 2005 parliamentary election, which saw PiS win 27.0% of the vote and 155 seats, becoming the largest party in the *Sejm*, led to fierce and embattled negotiations with PO over the breakdown of ministerial positions. The personal relationship of the Kaczyński twins and Donald Tusk, the leader of Civic Platform, would also sour immensely during the campaign for the October presidential election, with Lech Kaczyński narrowly beating Tusk for the position of President.⁸⁶ With this animosity, PiS instead entered a three-party coalition government with

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Millard, "Poland's Politics and the Travails of Transition after 2001: The 2005 Elections", 1011-1012.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 1024.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 1026.

Samoobrona and LPR, a decision that would change PiS' relationship to both the European Union and Poland as a whole.

PiS' first stint in government was, for lack of a better term, chaotic. Juggling between three governing parties, PiS found itself in a position where its moderate positioning on issues deemed part of a Polish political consensus, such as European integration, was beginning to crack under the pressure of the party's more nationalist and populist elements, including influence from its two coalition partners. A government reshuffle in July 2006 would place Jarosław Kaczyński as Prime Minister (breaking an electoral promise that the two brothers would not occupy both the positions of head of state and government at the same time) and would re-structure PiS closer towards its coalition partners, primarily in re-opening lustration efforts through granting extensive powers to the Institute of National Remembrance, a government agency tasked with archiving state documents related to the communist regime, to pursue lustration efforts against not only former members of the PZPR, but journalists and those involved in media during the communist regime.⁸⁷

In discussion with relevant academics during research interviews, conflicting views and opinions on the first PiS-lead government emerged, although all four interviewees noted that the party has shifted its rhetoric and radicalized in some form since 2007, especially around a stronger and more forceful Eurosceptic messaging.⁸⁸ A notable factor brought up in every interview was PiS' shift of rhetoric towards illiberal

⁸⁷ Kurczewski, Jacek. "The Spoiled Drama of Emancipation: Conflicting Narratives." *Polish Sociological Review*, no. 168 (2009): 544-545. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41275124>.

⁸⁸ Lázár, Nóra. "Euroscepticism in Hungary and Poland: A Comparative Analysis of Jobbik and the Law and Justice Parties." *Politeja*, no. 33 (2015): 224-225. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24919825>.

democracy and the role of the European Union during this transitional time. This shift from a reluctant pro-European position to a more open conflict with elements of the EU that PiS found problematic was visible during the party's first government through its legislation towards lustration efforts and a strong nationalist tone from the Kaczyński administration that favoured a "Europe of nation states", and which placed Poland as a unique part of the union, with its own values and cultural traditions informed by the role of the Catholic Church. Alongside a more secular fear of EU interference in national issues as integration continued, PiS argued that integration risked Poland losing its unique characteristic as a Catholic state, and therefore it positioned itself strongly in viewing the EU as a primarily economic union, with no room for a pan-European identity or connection on social issues and shared history.⁸⁹

This situation of a growing and more vocal Eurosceptic sentiment within PiS was complicated by the collapse of Samoobrona and LPR in the run-up to a snap parliamentary election in 2007. A slew of scandals surrounding Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Agriculture Andrzej Lepper weakened the already unstable coalition government, and PiS opted to push for an early election that possibly would have seen the party in a better position of negotiating a new mandate.⁹⁰ The subsequent election saw PiS' support plateau while the centrist Civic Platform emerged as largest party, leaving the Polish nationalist right in opposition.

⁸⁹ Surwillo, et al., "Between Euroscepticism and Eurosupport: The Attitudes of Urban and Rural Populations in Poland 2000–2008", 1515.

⁹⁰ Wolszczak, Grzegorz. *(Anti-)Corruption in Poland since Early 2000 to 2010*. Working paper no. 11. European Research Centre for Anti-Corruption and State-Building. September 2010. 7. <https://www.againstcorruption.eu/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/WP-11-Anti-Corruption-in-Poland-new.pdf>.

The more sensational event, however, was the failure of both Samoobrona and LPR to reach the five-percent popular vote threshold necessary for representation in the *Sejm*. In only six years, the two largest explicitly Eurosceptic parties represented in Polish politics had evaporated.⁹¹ This collapse would have a deep effect on PiS, as although its two coalition partners would enter the political wilderness, Euroscepticism in Poland would continue to evolve and gain purchase in more mainstream spaces, and especially within PiS, which now as an opposition party had to position itself as the alternative to both a pro-European government headed by its main political rival in Civic Platform, and calls for further integration and appeal towards a European identity from other EU member states. This position would leave PiS in a transformative situation, where the party's soft Euroscepticism would be bolstered with a renewed Catholic-nationalist messaging that would not only centre Polish messianism as a rhetorical tool and a way to inform Polish identity as PiS sees it, but also engage in radicalization, a growing sense of distrust in liberal democracy as an institution and the exclusion of voices that PiS views as not significantly "Polish" or even anti-Polish, while using historical narratives of victimhood and martyrdom to position their concept of Polishness in opposition to the European Union and its own identity-building.

⁹¹ Both Samoobrona and LPR still exist as political parties in 2023, albeit in different iterations than at their respective peaks. After Andrzej Lepper's death in 2011, Samoobrona has remained a fringe political outfit, and has faced numerous splits and defections to larger parties within agrarian, populist, and nationalist spaces. LPR has since rebranded itself as a moderate Christian democratic and pro-European party, a far cry from its time as a hardline Eurosceptic grouping based on the ideological underpinnings of National Democracy. Like Samoobrona, it remains in the political wilderness, and does not contest elections on its own.

4.2. PiS in opposition: 2007 to 2015

PiS' time in opposition between 2007 and 2015 changed the party from an establishment conservative party content with certain aspects of the Polish consensus around European integration (if growingly concerned for Poland's position and role within the union) to a organization far more rhetorically abrasive towards the European Union, and with a stronger appeal towards history and socio-religious signifiers to denote "Polishness" and inclusion (and conversely, exclusion) in the Polish nation. This shift happened relatively soon after the 2007 election, as organizers and supporters of Samoobrona and LPR moved from the flailing parties to PiS itself. Along with this movement came a strengthening of the already existent Catholic-nationalist and Eurosceptic sentiments existent within certain factions since its founding. Being placed in opposition, PiS, and specifically leader Jarosław Kaczyński, found itself having to realign its positionality and rhetoric, especially after the party faced further electoral losses in the 2010 presidential and 2011 parliamentary races.

In attempting to find a new footing in Polish politics, PiS began to question the very nature of the current Polish state. In returning to disagreements on Poland's lack of lustration, PiS made the natural argument that, if the Third Polish Republic had insufficiently purged communist influence from institutions, those institutions must be reformed and shaped to reflect a new administration serious about Poland's sovereignty and justice towards those repressed during the communist era. This position could be seen during the first PiS-led government between 2005 and 2007 in regard to the government's attempt to grant the Institute of National Remembrance a stronger mandate on lustration efforts, but it is within the party's role as opposition that this belief that Poland's democratic institutions were corrupted by post-communist forces merged with

and growing distrust of European institution, namely the EU's socially liberal policies, and a strong belief in Poland as a Catholic state historically victimized and oppressed by its neighbours, and in danger of losing its culture through secularization and European integration.

Positioning contemporary issues and discussions within these framing devices of Catholic nationalism, Euroscepticism, and a distrust in the institutions of the Third Republic created a perfect storm for the radicalization of PiS and its support structures between 2007 and 2015. Namely, PiS found an opening in populist rhetoric and messaging to position themselves back towards government, and once there, to consolidate power.⁹² This rhetoric, first noticeable during PiS' first stint in government, connected the party's foreign policy around the European Union and fears of social changes that would threaten the role of the Church in Polish culture to domestic concerns over ending post-communist corruption and securing Polish culture through a historical narrative of victimhood, martyrdom, and Catholic identity.⁹³ This especially took the form of a call for a moral and social revolution, and a division between "Poles" as defined by PiS, and "others", namely those within the opposition that disagreed with the party's turn towards a more radical rhetoric and the embrace of a populist lens.⁹⁴

In formulating the need for a moral and social revolution, PiS also found itself gaining a strong distrust of democratic institutions during this period. To the party and its

⁹² Jaskiernia, Jerzy. "Authoritarian Tendencies in the Polish Political System." In *New Authoritarianism: Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century*, edited by Jerzy J. Wiatr, 1st ed., 152–68. Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvdf08xx.12>.

⁹³ Shields, Stuart. "Opposing Neoliberalism? Poland's Renewed Populism and Post-Communist Transition." *Third World Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (2012): 372. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41507174>.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

support base, Poland's courts, governmental agencies, and other institutions were too connected to the compromise of the Round Table Agreement in 1989, and as such, these institutions must be radically reformed or even destroyed to eliminate post-communist influences and stem corruption. This attitude would develop not only into a distrust of existing institutions and a need to position PiS as a party willing to enact change, but in a distrust of liberal democracy itself, as the checks of balance of the system was seen as detrimental to the cause of reform and change needed to save Poland.⁹⁵ This would bring PiS close to the concept of illiberal democracy and the erosion of democratic principles to bolster the party's own views on what Poland under its tenure should look like, and how Poland should place itself in relation to the European Union.

4.3. Illiberal democracy and PiS

In his 1997 article "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy", Fareed Zakaria describes illiberal democracy as a regime that conducts ostensibly free and fair elections, but with a lack of separation between the government institutions and ruling powers, and a dismissal of liberal constitutionalism as the basis of the state, in opposition to liberal democracy.⁹⁶ Instead, illiberal democracies base themselves on creating a sense of popular will, that their policies and administration is legitimized through success in elections, granting them the power to enact the will of their voters.⁹⁷ In the context of PiS during the 2010s, this adoption of illiberal frameworks would help to create a basis for

⁹⁵ "Poland's post-communist 'system': between myth and reality". *France 24*, 28 July 2017. <https://www.france24.com/en/20170728-polands-post-communist-system-between-myth-reality>.

⁹⁶ Zakaria, Fareed. "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy." *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (1997): 22-23. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20048274>.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 41-43.

how the party would fashion and implement policies during its next turn in government, and connect it to a larger trend of illiberal and populist growth in European states in the 2010s.⁹⁸

After facing another electoral loss to Civic Platform in the 2011 parliamentary election, Kaczyński was quoted as stating “[...] the day will come when we will succeed, and we will have Budapest in Warsaw”, a reference to the then-fledgling supermajority government of Viktor Orbán in Hungary.⁹⁹ By only a year later, Orbán had successfully passed a new constitution with limited opposition input, and had created the conditions necessary to disenfranchise independent media and take control of key institutions, namely judicial courts.¹⁰⁰ Kaczyński’s statement on creating “[...] a Budapest in Warsaw” was a clear statement that PiS saw developments in Hungary as positive, and was openly looking at the administration as a one to emulate.¹⁰¹ In the succeeding years, PiS and Fidesz (Orbán’s governing party) would find themselves staunch allies against European attempts at sanctions and legal junctions against the two governments from

⁹⁸ Krastev, Ivan. “Eastern Europe’s Illiberal Revolution: The Long Road to Democratic Decline.” *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 3 (2018): 49–56. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44822144>.

⁹⁹ Buckley, Neil and Henry Foy. “Poland’s new government finds a model in Orbán’s Hungary” *Financial Times*, 6 January 2016. <https://www.ft.com/content/0a3c7d44-b48e-11e5-8358-9a82b43f6b2f>.

¹⁰⁰ Kalb, Don. “Post-Socialist Contradictions: The Social Question in Central and Eastern Europe and the Making of the Illiberal Right.” In *The Social Question in the Twenty-First Century: A Global View*, edited by Jan Breman, Kevan Harris, Ching Kwan Lee, and Marcel van der Linden, 1st ed., 208–26. University of California Press, 2019. 223. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvr7fcnz.17>.

¹⁰¹ It must be stated that much like popularized historical narratives of Poland’s history that emphasize a messianic and victimized history, Hungarian nationalist historiography and narratives ascribe a similar aspect of victimization to Hungarian history, and these narratives have been used by the Fidesz government consistently since its electoral win in 2010, if not earlier. Although it remains that Polish nationalist historical narratives have a unique element in their adoption of the “Christ of Nations” mythology from Adam Mickiewicz, similar trends are visible elsewhere throughout Europe, especially as political rhetoric and factors in forming and consolidating national identities.

2015 onwards, positioning themselves as a nationalist vanguard against encroaching interference from Brussels.¹⁰²

Alongside this affinity to illiberal democracy through connections with similar movements, PiS's distrust of democratic institutions were severely affected by the crash of a Tupolev Tu-154 aircraft outside Smolensk, Russia, on 10 April, 2010. The flight, carrying President Lech Kaczyński and ninety-five other passengers and crew, was intended to carry its delegation the 70th anniversary of the Katyn massacre, where 22,000 Polish officers and members of the intelligentsia were deliberately executed by the Soviet Union in 1940.¹⁰³ The plane, facing poor weather, missed the runway in Smolensk and crashed, killing all aboard.¹⁰⁴ In the ensuing investigation conducted by a joint Polish-Russian team officially placed blame on pilot error in 2011, but this report did not assuage conspiratorial notions that the crash was a Russian plot, and even notions that the plane itself was bombed instead of crashed.¹⁰⁵ PiS was notable in this discussion due to the personal tragedy to the Kaczyński family, and anger permeated the party's reaction to the investigation. The parliamentary club refused to settle the matter, with deputy leader Antoni Macierewicz forming his own investigation committee, placing continued blame on Russia, and insinuating that the Polish government of the time, led by Prime Minister Donald Tusk, had buried key issues in the official investigation.¹⁰⁶ The crash

¹⁰² Végh, Zsuzsanna. "Hungary: The EU's Troublemaker." Edited by Josef Janning. *Keeping Europeans Together: Assessing the State of EU Cohesion*. European Council on Foreign Relations, 2016. 72-73. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21671.17>.

¹⁰³ Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland, Vol. 2: 1795 to the Present*, 334-335.

¹⁰⁴ Easton, Adam. "Smolensk Tragedy Continues to Haunt Poland." BBC. March 31, 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35924688>.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

provided a new lens for PiS to look at Polish institutions. To Jarosław Kaczyński and his party, the prior issues of post-communist influence, unwanted European integration, and the need to protect Poland's heritage and sovereignty from these took a far more personal tone after the Smolensk disaster, with Kaczyński openly blaming Tusk for the events, stating in 2012 that “[...] everything that happened before the catastrophe is your fault. This is the result of your policies. In the political sense you bear 100% responsibility for the catastrophe in Smolensk.”¹⁰⁷

PiS was now willingly accepting conspiracy and treason as a motive within its largest political rival, and this would paint the party's rhetoric once in power, especially in paint Donald Tusk and Civic Platform as “anti-Polish” and dangerously cosmopolitan. This event also secured a sense of paranoia and need for control with the PiS party brass, for if a moral revolution was to be secured, and for Poland to become a truly independent state free from victimization from its enemies, PiS must thoroughly expunge any influences, institutions, and variables not within its control or sphere to protect Poland and its identity. To PiS, enemies were everywhere going towards the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections, and they would be sure to fight any criticism to their, be they opposition voters in urban and western Poland, or elites in Brussels.

4.4. PiS, messianism, and the politics of the Church

As stated in previous chapters, the Catholic Church in Poland has been historically (and remains) a notable player in policy-making and politics, and has leveraged its position as a “protector of Polish culture” during periods of repression to

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

influence and guide collective Polish identity formation, especially since democratization in the 1980s. Due to this, the political power the Church wields in conversations around Poland's history and historiography have become important for political parties in gaining popular support, especially within nationalist circles. Due to these circumstances, PiS has always had a close relationship to the Church since the party's founding in 2001, and the two have existed within a symbiotic relationship since PiS' electoral success in 2015.¹⁰⁸ Much like how the Church has portrayed itself as the protector of Polish culture (especially under the communist regime), PiS has portrayed itself as a protector of the Polish Church in the political sphere. The party frames the Catholic Church as the core of Polish identity, a signifier of Polish national spirit, and much like mentioned by Dmowski in *Kościół, Naród i Państwo*, inherent to the very being of Poland as a concept.¹⁰⁹ A messianic view of the Church's role in Poland, that its defining feature is the protection and care of Polishness in times of repression and victimization, and that these efforts will lead to a destined resurgence of Poland, play well into PiS' ideal of a moral revolution, and this intersection defines a unique part of the party's rhetoric: that of an inherent Catholicism that will the Polish people as a nation.

With this specific understanding of Poland's position as a Catholic state within a broader Christian Europe, PiS has been openly bolstering the Church as a political entity, and directly creating a connection between the religious services of dioceses with

¹⁰⁸ Hirschl, Ran, and Ayelet Shachar. "Competing Orders? The Challenge of Religion to Modern Constitutionalism." *The University of Chicago Law Review* 85, no. 2 (2018): 441–442. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26455913>.

¹⁰⁹ Bucholc, Marta. "Schengen and the Rosary: Catholic Religion and the Postcolonial Syndrome in Polish National Habitus." *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 45, no. 1 (171) (2020): 154. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26873884>.

bolstering support through further politicizing the role of the Church in a country were it already held significant institutional clout.¹¹⁰ This deliberate connection has been both a benefit and issue to PiS. In creating a direct line between support for the Church and support for PiS' policies and narratives on Polish identity, the party has been able to create an imagery of a political-religious alliance that has proven successful in keeping support in rural and conservative spaces.¹¹¹ In exchange, the Church has emerged as a key policy maker, with renewed bans on abortion and anti-LGBT+ legislation forming a key plank in PiS' second tenure in government.¹¹² However, the increased politicalization of the Church has alienated many Poles, especially in urban centres, and apostasy (the formal renouncing of association with the Catholic Church) has increased sharply as the formal institutions of the Church have become viewed as an extension of PiS to liberal Christians.¹¹³

As Poland increasingly secularizes, both PiS and the Catholic Church have attempted to deal with this phenomenon, mainly in framing secularizing forces as foreign actors and anti-Polish. In this framing, if Poland is an inherently Catholic state whose identity is tied historically to the Church as its cultural protector, an attack on the Church

¹¹⁰ Koschalka, Ben. "Threatening church means threatening Poland and cannot be tolerated, says Kaczyński." *Notes from Poland*, 17 January 2022. <https://notesfrompoland.com/2022/01/17/threatening-church-means-threatening-poland-and-cannot-be-tolerated-says-kaczynski/>.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Skóra, Maria. "In Poland, the Catholic church backed abortion bans and authoritarian politics. Young people are turning away." *The Guardian*, 5 April 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/apr/05/catholic-church-poland-law-and-justice-party-young-voters>.

¹¹³ Ibid.

(even as minor as lowering church attendance) is seen as an attack on Poland.¹¹⁴ With this position, and bolstered by its established history of viewing European integration with suspicion, PiS would set its eye on framing Polish-EU relations during its time in government through a religious and cultural lens, and with the belief that further integration, and the supposed secularization that it brought, would in some form destroy Poland as a Catholic country.

¹¹⁴ Koschalka, “Threatening church means threatening Poland and cannot be tolerated, says Kaczyński.”

CHAPTER 5

Looking West: Poland and the European Union

The Catholic Church in Poland found itself in an envious situation by the early 1990s. With democratisation underway and a political consensus consolidating, the Church was now in a position to become a clear and notable actor within Polish politics, despite the republic's official separation of church and state. In the ensuing discussion around a new constitution in 1997 (as the then-current constitution was a heavily amended form of the communist constitution of 1952), the relationship between the Catholic Church and the state apparatus became a point of contention. Marian Kzraklewski, the then-leader of Solidarity Electoral Action (*Akcja Wyborcza Solidarność*, AWS), the parliamentary wing of the Solidarity trade union and allied conservative forces, stated that, in regards to a new constitution, "a national compromise would be possible if everyone would recognize that there are facts in Polish history which are not open to interpretation. One of these facts is this: that Poland was always based both in its system of values, as well as, later, in its constitutional legislation, on Christian values..."¹¹⁵

This dominance that the Catholic Church saw within Polish politics was part of an attempt to build a consensus within a young and fledgling democratic system: A "thick line" would be drawn towards association with the former regime, but an understanding would be made that the Church, as a major force in opposition during the 1980s, would be given a position of reverence and respect by the political class, even if

¹¹⁵ Porter, Brian. "The Catholic Nation: Religion, Identity, and the Narratives of Polish History." *The Slavic and East European Journal* 45, no. 2 (2001): 297-298. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3086330>.

officially Poland constitutionally enforced the separation of church and state.¹¹⁶

Alongside this consensus-building around the political role of the Church in a ostensibly secular democracy, the conversation around European integration took a similar path.

The arguments for Poland joining the European Union were as much based on moral feelings and ideological wants as much as the economic benefits of joining the common market. The pro-European consensus within Poland during the 1990s emphasized not only the European Union as an economic actor, but as a way for Poland to “rejoin” the West after forty years behind the Iron Curtain. In a 1996 address given to the Royal Institute for International Affairs in Brussels, then-Foreign Minister Dariusz Rosati gave a speech outlining Poland’s goals of European integration, framing his argument not only as a consistent policy, but an aspect of Polish identity and belonging in Europe:

“We have never renounced our ties with the civilisation and culture of Europe. However, Poles had to wait until 1989 to see the totalitarian system east of the "iron curtain collapse and only then be able to start fulfilling their aspirations. Poland, freed from the ties of subordination to the Soviet empire created by the decisions taken in Yalta and has opted for the shortest path leading to a united to a united Europe, i.e. the path towards a European Union membership. Just in the space of seven years Poland has registered achievements that already in this century should confirm its due legitimate position in the process of the continent's political and economic integration. Within this short period of time has turned into a state whose structures, institutions and mechanisms have been remodelled in line with the mature western democracies, and have proved their stability, viability and potential for continued and balanced development [...] Our European policy, however, should not be perceived only in the narrow sense of Poland's policy towards the European structures. For is not only a policy of Poland within Europe but

¹¹⁶ Kosicki, Piotr H. “Poland’s Identity Crisis.” *Foreign Policy*, no. 140 (2004): 15. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4147511>.

also for Europe. Obviously, joining paths with the European Union constitutes its focal point.”¹¹⁷

Poland’s wish to join the European Union was also influenced by an attitude in Brussels that emphasized a quick route for post-Soviet Europe to become members of the supranational organization, and this fast track to integration would influence Poland’s relationship with the EU well into the present. Rosati’s statements in 1996 show not only that Poland was aiming for a quick and successful integration into the EU, but that EU itself was willing to facilitate such an endeavour.

5.1. A short history of European integration in Poland

The European Union in the 1990s was facing a period of rapid growth, consolidation towards supranational institutions such as the European Parliament and Council, and with a prevalent sense of expansion towards the democratizing east.¹¹⁸ In 1993, as part of a growing conversation around European expansion towards the post-Soviet states, the Copenhagen Criteria was set as the unofficial criteria meant to identify possible applicants for European membership, and to bolster European integration within current member states through maintaining a consistent framework towards legal and economic institutions:

- Stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities;
- A functioning market economy and the ability to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the EU;

¹¹⁷ Rosati, Dariusz. “Poland on its Way to the European Union.” *Studia Diplomatica* 49, no. 6 (1996): 47–48. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44837549>.

¹¹⁸ Búrca, Gráinne de. “Is EU Supranational Governance a Challenge to Liberal Constitutionalism?” *The University of Chicago Law Review* 85, no. 2 (2018): 338. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26455910>.

- The ability to take on the obligations of membership, including the capacity to effectively implement the rules, standards and policies that make up the body of EU law (the ‘*acquis*’), and adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union.¹¹⁹

The Copenhagen Criteria’s goal of providing a unified set of requirements for aspiring states affected Poland’s relationship to the supranational organization in two notable ways: economically, the Polish government aggressively pursued the privatization of state assets, and the opening of markets through “shock therapy” headed by Minister of Finance Leszek Balcerowicz in the early 1990s.¹²⁰ This rapid change of pace was, to many Polish elites, not only a way of assuring the country adhered to the Copenhagen Criteria in the formation of a market economy, but “[...] to create a economy ‘in the style of Western Europe’”.¹²¹

The Copenhagen Criteria similarly affected the nascent Polish democratic regime’s relationship with the judiciary through the Criteria’s (admittedly vague) guarantee towards the rule of law and human rights. In the wake of the collapse of Solidarity as a unified political movement and the splintering and consolidation of political parties, the question of lustration, or the deliberate exclusion and ostracization of those formerly involved in the previous communist regime, remained unanswered. Mazowiecki’s “thick line” separating the Polish Third Republic from the former communist regime was to be

¹¹⁹ “Accession criteria (Copenhagen criteria)”, EUR-Lex. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/accession-criteria-copenhagen-criteria.html>.

¹²⁰ Zeniewski, Peter. “Neoliberalism, Exogenous Elites and the Transformation of Solidarity.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 63, no. 6 (2011): 984-985. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27975606>.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 984.

maintained, primarily through a fear within elites that reprisal and persecution would risk Poland's integration process.¹²²

As the dominating factor of Polish politics in the 1990s, European integration was a consistent goal for governments of the period, and this road to integration heavily influenced other domestic and internal matters, from the emerging private sector to the promotion of a "thick line".¹²³ Moreover, Polish accession into the European Union was viewed not only as an economic benefit to Poles, but a necessary step in "re-joining" Europe and positioning Poland as a truly European state at the heart of the continent, temporarily removed during the period of communist rule. In 2002, Prime Minister Leszek Miller bolstered this sentiment at the finalizing negotiations between the Polish government and EU representatives, with Miller stating: "We have removed the heavy burden of the Yalta agreement and the postwar division of Europe. From Polish Solidarity, which won freedom and democracy for Central and Eastern Europe, we are approaching the true solidarity of Europe and of Europeans."¹²⁴

This sentiment was not unique entirely within Poland at the time. Although the specifics of Poland's historical reality and popular myths heavily influenced the imagery of the state being welcomed back into a broader European identity and union, similar sentiments within the European Union pushed the supranational organization to debate and pursue efforts in enlargement and furthering integration. The formation of a pan-European identity was built over decades of integration, expansion, and the solidification

¹²² Szczerbiak, "Dealing with the Communist Past or the Politics of the Present? Lustration in Post-Communist Poland", 556.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Taras, Ray. "Poland's Accession into the European Union: Parties, Policies and Paradoxes." *The Polish Review* 48, no. 1 (2003): 3. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25779367>.

of first the European Coal and Steel Community and later the European Union, and by the 1990s had created its own historical narrative and imagery around European unification, an open market, an acceptance of liberal democracy, and the inclusion of as many European states within its borders.¹²⁵

5.2. Poland's early disagreements with the European Union

This period was also marked not only by the expansion of the European Union, but also by the argument that the EU should move to further integrate its member states, including those within Central and Southeastern Europe that were slated to join the organization in the half decade of the 21st century.¹²⁶ Importantly, this discussion of integration would bring along a question regarding the European Union's identity as an organization: if the EU was more than a single market, and could conceivably be a state onto itself, what does it mean to *be* European in this context, and what unifying characteristics could be identified as pan-European? In debates around a European Constitution in 2004, the question of whether the preamble should include references to Christianity or religion in general as a part of European heritage was heavily debated.¹²⁷ Within this, the Polish government (not a month removed from its formal accession into the EU on 1 May 2004) petitioned for the European Constitution to include a preamble

¹²⁵ Özoflu, Melek Aylin. "Construction of European Identity by the Pro-European Parties." *Uluslararası İlişkiler / International Relations* 19, no. 74 (2022): 78. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27130877>.

¹²⁶ Kühnhardt, Ludger. "From National Identities to European Constitutionalism." In *European Union - The Second Founding: The Changing Rationale of European Integration*, 1st ed., 27–29. Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 2008. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv941vm5.4>.

¹²⁷ Black, Ian. "Christianity bedevils talks on EU treaty." *The Guardian*, 25 May 2004. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/may/25/eu.religion>.

based on Poland's own 1997 constitution regarding faith, which attempted to denote the role of an officially secular state while including religious feelings, by stating "both those who believe in God as the source of truth, justice, good and beauty, as well as those not sharing such faith but respecting those universal values from other sources".¹²⁸ The European Constitution would fail to be fully ratified, and in 2007 was made obsolete by the less ambitious Treaty of Lisbon.

Poland's position towards the European Constitution shows an early fracture in the Polish pro-European consensus post-accession. Much like discussions in 1997 around Poland's own constitution, in which conservatives argued for the inclusion of Christianity as a cultural and national signifier, Poland (alongside other culturally Catholic states such as Portugal and Italy) saw the need to include a Christian preamble as a key identifier of European heritage and culture. With the strength of the Polish Catholic Church during this period as a political entity with a vested interest in promoting Poland as a religious country with a unique relationship with the Church, the secular nature of many EU institutions and other member states meant a cleavage within pro-European Polish politics: The integration of the country into the EU was a net benefit economically, and fulfilled the want to "re-join" Europe after the collapse of the communist government. However, conflicting cultural and historical narratives from Warsaw and Brussels showed that full integration would have to address concepts of identity and what it would mean to be "Polish" and "European" in regards to the cultural role of religion in the 21st century.

The conflict over the preamble of the European Constitution shows that Poland is not unique in placing the Catholic Church, or Christianity in general, as a marker of

¹²⁸ Ibid.

identity and nationhood. The European Union itself has historically struggled with its secular institutions operating on a continent where Christianity has traditionally defined and influenced cultural norms, legal structures, and national identities.¹²⁹ As the European Union and its predecessors have developed and physically expanded over the decades, a clearer messaging from Brussels has emerged towards viewing a pan-European identity through association with the Union's institutions and democratic law, rather than pre-existing socio-religious institutions.

In discussing the formation of a pan-European identity with interviewees between September and December of 2022, all four experts interviewed stated that the European Union uses legalism and values based on humanist principles to construct a secular identity, with one interviewee stating that the EU has placed focus on a mantra of “[...] democracy, human rights, and the rule of law”.¹³⁰ This identity-building towards a humanist and secular democratic ideal clashed with Polish identity-building that was occurring in the 1990s and early 2000s, namely the use of the Church as a marker of national pride and cohesion, and the role of Poland as a part of Christian Europe. This divergence would wax and wane over the years as both Brussels and Warsaw battled with differing governments and views on pan-national cooperation during the 2000s and 2010s, but this European emphasis on a post-national identity surrounding “democracy, human rights, and the rule of law” with a clear separation from religious institutions would help to fuel a belief within the Polish right-wing and nationalist circles that the

¹²⁹ May, John D'Arcy. “European Union, Christian Division?: Christianity's Responsibility for Europe's Past and Future.” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 89, no. 354 (2000): 125. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30095345>.

¹³⁰ Anonymous, interview by Joseph Fitkowski, October 2022, interview 1, transcript and recording.

country's accession into the EU, although economically beneficial, was not the "rejoining" many viewed shortly after Poland's democratization.

With Polish nationalists portraying a narrative of a state inherently defined by its Catholicism and its role as a "Christ of Nations", this conflicting narrative from EU institutions would create a cleavage that showed that Dariusz Rosati's optimistic belief in 1996 that Poland would effortlessly integrate into an open and accommodating Union would be more difficult than expected. Moreover, this conflict would provide a convenient point of separation for Catholic nationalists: if the European Union was to deny Europe's Christian heritage, what would it mean for a Polish culture that, in the words of Roman Dmowski, "[was] rooted in its very existence"?¹³¹ This question would provide a space for Euroscepticism, once a maligned movement in Poland, to thrive, and for entities within this space to chip away at the pro-European Polish consensus of the 1990s and early 2000s. Within this period, a new party named Law and Justice would find tremendous success, framing itself as a protector of the Polish nation and its values against an increasingly secularizing European Union, and using this division as a justification for reform, reaction, and the rationalization of democratic backsliding.

¹³¹ Dmowski, *Kościół, naród i państwo*, 25.

CHAPTER 6

Katolicka Polska, serce Europy: PiS, Identity, and Europe

In the lead-up to the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections, PiS positioned itself as a protective force against encroachment from a variety of intruders. Domestically, the party viewed itself as a government-in-waiting against a corrupt and cosmopolitan elite within Civic Platform, with the government facing a mixture of voter fatigue and scandals around the latter part of its second term in government, namely the leak of conversations at a high-end restaurant in Warsaw in 2014 between senior government officials that painted the Civic Platform-led government as elitest, out of touch, and too comfortable in power.¹³² To PiS, this was irrefutable evidence that reform was necessary and that Civic Platform had left “Poland in ruins”, and that only a physical change of government would lead to a return of prosperity and accountability to voters.¹³³

Regarding European matters, PiS heavily weaponized the European migrant and refugee crisis at the time, framing it as a non-white and Islamic invasion of Europe.¹³⁴ Within this, PiS promoted itself as a protector against the migrants, and leveraged pre-existing sentiments in right-wing and far-right communities of Poland having been betrayed by the European Union to paint itself as a barrier against European interference

¹³² Romaniec, Rosalia. “Polish wiretapping scandal.” *Deutsche Welle*, 23 June 2014. <https://www.dw.com/en/curious-wiretapping-affair-rocks-polish-government/a-17730517>.

¹³³ Balfour, Rosa, Laura Basagni, Anne Flotho-Liersch, Paola Fusaro, Laura Gelhaus, Laura Groenendaal, Daniel Hegedus, et al. “Divide and Obstruct: Populist Parties and EU Foreign Policy.” German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2019. 40. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21237>.

¹³⁴ Jones, Will, Alexander Teytelboym, and Dalibor Rohac. “Europe’s Refugee Crisis: Pressure Points and Solutions.” American Enterprise Institute, 2017. 5. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep03281>.

in Poland's demographic and cultural makeup.¹³⁵ In the 2015 March of Independence, a far-right rally organizing annually on 11 November (Poland's independence day), banners and signs reading "Poland for the Polish" and "Stop Islamization" were given notable visibility, and this imagery and slogans were parroted by PiS in the leadup to elections to differentiate itself from a cautious Civic Platform that had accepted 6,800 refugees as part of a pan-European attempt to alleviate the flow of refugees and migrants from the main entry points of Italy, Greece, and Spain.¹³⁶ During this crisis, PiS and affiliated media actively adopted a nativist and anti-refugee rhetoric around cultural and religious differences, public safety, and even images of the dangers of allowing refugees into Europe personified as sexual assault.¹³⁷

With this rhetoric, PiS entered the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections with a campaign strategy that emphasized returning Poland to a moral centre and strengthening its identity as a Catholic state in the face of "Islamization" from refugees and European elites. Compared to 2005, the party had shifted to a more openly Eurosceptic position, whereas although PiS still valued Poland's membership in the European Union, it



Figure 6.1. In February 2016, right-wing daily *W Sieci*, closely connected with PiS, published this magazine cover, portraying the "Islamic rape of Europe." The banner above the masthead promotes a guide to using the 500+ program, a recent PiS policy at the time.

¹³⁵ Wiącek, Elżbieta. "The Rhetoric of the 'March of Independence' in Poland (2010-2017) as the Answer for the Policy of Multiculturalism in EU and the Refugee Crisis." *Politeja*, no. 61 (2019): 151, 155-156. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26919891>.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, 155-156.

¹³⁷ Yermakova, Olena. "Mythology of the Law and Justice Party's Migration Discourse." *Politeja*, no. 63 (2019): 178-179. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26919943>.

broke from Civic Platform's reputation during its tenure as a steadfast supporter of European integration to a position of openly questioning the structure of the EU, especially the secular and integrationist nature of the organization.¹³⁸

PiS' positioning in 2015 as a party willing to return Polish identity to an openly Catholic and nationalist base worked in the environment around the elections. Civic Platform's economic liberalism and pro-European sentiments as the "poster child of European integration" did not sit well with a section of the population that believed that the "economic miracle" that the EU brought with membership since 2004 did not extend to them, and that a significant number of Poles were left abandoned by PO and its governments.¹³⁹ Using these sentiments to their advantage, PiS was able to create a message of fighting for those abandoned through a mixture of increased government welfare and nationalist rhetoric against the EU and pro-European Polish parties for failing to support rural Poland, and pushing for policies deemed disastrous to the Polish economy and people, such as the supranational organization's attempt to form a pan-European migrant policy.¹⁴⁰

This messaging paid off, as PiS successfully captured the presidency in May of 2015, with MEP Andrzej Duda defeating incumbent Civic Platform-backed president Bronisław Komorowski. An even larger success for PiS occurred in the October parliamentary election as the party and its significantly smaller satellite parties (the more openly Catholic-nationalist *Solidarna Polska* and the more moderate conservative

¹³⁸ Balfour, Basagni, Flotho-Liersch, Fusaro, Gelhaus, Groenendaal, Hegedus, et al. "Divide and Obstruct: Populist Parties and EU Foreign Policy", 40.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 41.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

Poland Together), despite only gaining 37.6% of the vote, received an absolute majority in the *Sejm*, a first for modern Polish politics.

Now granted the legislative and executive power to enact its policies and goals, PiS wasted little time consolidating power. Despite Jarosław Kaczyński himself being deliberately placed in the background during the campaign due to his polarized reputation and the promotion of campaign manager Beata Szydło as the party's candidate for Prime Minister, Kaczyński remained in firm control of the party and government decisions, including extensive control over the formation of Szydło's cabinet. Quickly, PiS began implementing policies that promoted their image of Poland during their campaign: a strengthened welfare state bolstered by payments to new families (the 500+ and Rodzina+ programs), a direct refusal to engage with further settlement and relocation of refugees from other EU member states, and – most controversially – a concentrated takeover of the judicial branch, namely the Constitutional Tribunal and the Supreme Court.

6.1. PiS, the rule of law, and control of the narrative

PiS' discussion of a moral and social revolution and the need for reform manifested into an extremely controversial, contentious, and drawn-out battle to control Poland's judiciary. Initiated by the party's commanding electoral win, PiS argued that a legislative majority meant that, in the eyes of voters, the party was given the mandate to enact its policies, including reforming the judicial branch with limited input from the opposition. To this effect, PiS began working towards introducing a package of reforms that would, through the creation of mandatory retirements and shifting the responsibility of appointing judges to the government, give the governing party an essential monopoly

in appointing judges to the judicial branch, as well as creating vacancies through the removal of previous appointments under Civic Platform.¹⁴¹

These reforms proved controversial in their effect of removing the separation between the judicial, legislative, and executive branches, and the European Union became concerned that PiS' legislation broke conventions agreed upon in the Copenhagen Criteria, namely the ability to provide "[stable] institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities". To PiS however, this breaking of a part of the nonbinding Copenhagen Criteria was justifiable in the grander scheme of purging the courts from post-communist and anti-Polish influences, especially in regard to removing appointees from what was framed as an extremely corrupt previous administration.¹⁴² With PiS' legislative majority and control of the presidency, this legislation was framed as further legitimized in its right to reform the Supreme Court, Constitutional Tribunal, and local courts in the party image of a judiciary free from corrupting influences. This attitude matches Fareed Zakaria's depiction of illiberal democracies in "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy", with PiS interpreting electoral victories as wide-sweeping mandates, and the voice and rights of opposition can be safely ignored.¹⁴³

Opposition parties and individuals that voiced disagreement – initially with the judicial reforms, and later with other policies and rhetoric of PiS – were part of *totalna opozycja* ("total opposition"). This group is composed of, according to a 2020 interview

¹⁴¹ Scheppele, Kim Lane. "Autocratic Legalism." *The University of Chicago Law Review* 85, no. 2 (2018): 568. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26455917>.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy", 22.

from the far-right Italian Catholic website *The Daily Compass* with Jacek Karnowski (editor-in-chief of the right-wing daily *W Sieci*), opposition politicians, civil society groups, and the LGBT+ movement.¹⁴⁴ These groups are framed as “[attempting] to deny the newly elected conservative politicians rightful power to govern”, and as funded or supported by secular or outside forces, with a strong sense that the “total opposition” is anti-democratic and anti-Polish in its opposition to PiS’ reforms.¹⁴⁵ This attitude is central to PiS’ style of governing since its return to government, and has been perhaps the clearest example of the party’s belief that liberal democracy is antithetical to not only PiS itself and its goals, but to the Polish nation and its image abroad, as Karnowski states that “[even] today we have neighbours interested in weakening our position.”¹⁴⁶

This conspiratorial mindset around Poland’s reputation abroad, and the influences of foreign actors, extended beyond the judicial reforms into an equally controversial takeover of state media, as the government quickly moved to replace key positions at *Telewizja Polska*, the public state broadcaster, under the justification of promoting a more pro-Polish narrative.¹⁴⁷ This was explicitly stated as a rationale by PiS parliamentary caucus leader Ryszard Terlecki in 2016, who stated that “if the media imagine that they will occupy Poles in coming weeks with criticizing our changes or our draft changes, then this needs to be stopped.”¹⁴⁸ Much like the judicial changes, the

¹⁴⁴ Rędzioch, Włodzimierz. “Total opposition” attempts to destabilise Poland.” *The Daily Compass*, 24 September 2020. <https://newdailycompass.com/en/total-opposition-attempts-to-destabilise-poland>.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Chapman, Annabelle. "Pluralism Under Attack: The Assault on Press Freedoms in Poland." Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-reports/assault-press-freedom-poland>.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

justification given for a consolidation of state-owned media towards PiS' party line was, in essence, the protection of Poland, its reputation, and identity.

Through these moves to consolidate power and promote its messaging through a loyal media, PiS in its first term intended to create an environment that bolstered existing narratives of Poland's unique relationship with Catholicism and social conservatism, and framing anything outside of this relationship as foreign, as thus dangerous to Polish collective identity. This rapid change in both foreign and domestic policy and rhetoric left the EU blindsided: Under Civic Platform, the Polish government proudly portrayed itself as the "poster child of Europe", an economic success story that was able to weather even the 2008 financial recession with minimal damage.¹⁴⁹ But with PiS' new rhetoric towards external actors and its domestic reforms, this narrative of Polish integration into Europe, once bolstered by a pro-European consensus that dominated Polish politics, began to seriously crack.

PiS' new messaging differed greatly from the optimism and march towards European integration that denoted Civic Platform's time in power. PiS remains ostensibly supportive of the European project, namely in its role in providing economic subsidies to key Polish industries, but has severely soured on the EU's social policies, and has made this opposition well-known and key to its rhetoric towards the supranational organization, framing it as an interloper and foreign influence on Polish tradition, culture, and politics.¹⁵⁰ This framing further creates conflict in Polish-EU

¹⁴⁹ Orenstein, Mitchell A. "Poland: From Tragedy to Triumph." *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 1 (2014): 23–27. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23526932>.

¹⁵⁰ Buras, Piotr. "Europe and its Discontents: Poland's Collision Course with the European Union." European Council on Foreign Relations, 2017. 2. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21565>.

relations in the present, as PiS has not only questioned the present-day role of the EU in the affairs of member states, but it's identity as well.

This shift in attitude towards the European Union was contemporaneous with a domestic move towards elevating the role of the Roman Catholic Church and religion in general in Polish history, and portraying PiS' conflict with the European Union not as a spat on the intricacies of integration, but a full-fledged battle between Poland's role as an explicitly Catholic state, and the secular and humanist foreign notions of the West. To this end, Polish history has been used to formulate a narrative of Poland as a "bulwark of Christianity" against secular forces, and those that would oppose Poland's moral revolution.

6.2. The Bulwark of Christianity

The term "Bulwark of Christianity" (*Antemurale Christianitatis* in Latin) stems from, in a Polish context, the 13th century through a description of Poland acting a defender against Mongolian invasion, depicting the country as a "wall" against pagan threats to medieval Christendom.¹⁵¹ With the rise of the Ottoman Empire in the 15th century onwards, the Muslim state's Christian neighbours were similarly praised by Papal administrations for successfully warding off Ottoman expansion into southern and eastern Europe, with the term *antemurale christianitatis* being used to describe Poland-Lithuania, Hungary, Croatia, and Albania at differing points during the early modern period.¹⁵² This narrative of being a barrier keeping the Islamic world at bay for the sake

¹⁵¹ Knoll, Paul W. "Poland as 'Antemurale Christianitatis' in the Late Middle Ages." *The Catholic Historical Review* 60, no. 3 (1974): 386. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25019573>.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 397-398.

of other Christian states blended well into later messianic narratives that emerged in the 19th century after the wake of the Partitions especially in operationalizing abstract notions of Poland's martyrdom. Poland's suffering and eventual resurrection was bolstered by its historical actions in defending Christianity from foreign aggression and, in the process, saving Europe both physically and spiritually.

The historical accuracy of the "Bulwark of Christianity" narrative is more nuanced. The term more so explains abstract beliefs and feelings around Ottoman expansion and the role of the Church in geopolitics during the medieval and early modern periods. These notions did influence some religious policy and rhetoric in Poland-Lithuania during this era, but the physical reality of a multicultural and multireligious state with a strong legal tradition for religious tolerance and autonomy meant that the concept of a Polish "Bulwark of Christianity" was limited primarily to foreign matters and narratives.¹⁵³ Even within this space, Poland-Lithuania's relations with the Ottoman Empire proved more nuanced. Although the Ottomans proved a thorn in the side of Polish sovereignty and expansion in the regions of Podolia, Bessarabia, and Moldavia (present-day southwestern Ukraine, northern Romania, and Moldova) and Polish forces would find themselves in battle against the Ottomans throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, the two states would also find similarities in foreign policy around Russian and Austrian expansion. As Polish-Lithuania felt more threatened by its Christian neighbours in the 18th century, it would increasingly form cautious support towards the Ottoman Empire, and the latter would even become a place of refuge during the Partitions for emigrating Poles. This is not to state that religious beliefs and feelings did not influence physical action or the Polish view on their position within

¹⁵³ Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland, Vol. 1: The Origins to 1795*, 347.

Christendom, but the title of “Bulwark of Christianity” does not reflect on Poland in all its aspects, and is more a honorific applicable in only one era, and within a Polish context, only in the realm of Poland’s relationship with one of its historic neighbours.

The reason for dissecting the accuracy of “Bulwark of Christianity” as a term is due to its use in the present day. Whereas the title of “Bulwark of Christianity” in the early modern period was rather loose and applicable to essentially any Christian state bordering a non-Christian state, the modern use of the Bulwark is much more attached to later developments in nationalist narratives and ethnic-religious connections made well after Poland-Lithuania’s decline and dismantling. In a modern context, the Bulwark of Christianity is a more militaristic variant of messianic and Catholic-nationalist rhetoric that appeals to a historical truth of Poland fighting for not only its independence and sovereignty, but its religion and, by extent, the religious institutions of Europe as a whole.¹⁵⁴

The Bulwark of Christianity as a present-day narrative is typically viewed as less a physical battle, and more a fight for a religious and cultural soul. In this narrative, Poland (and, by extension, its government) is framed as not only a martyr fighting against outside forces for the benefit of the greater whole of Europe, but for the cultural and social cohesion of a specific Christian Europe, as was Poland’s role within this dynamic.¹⁵⁵ This interpretation is not wholly without historical precedence in Poland’s relationship with the European Union. During negotiations in the 1990s, Poland’s act of

¹⁵⁴ Blažević, Zrinka. “The Image of the Wall: The Antemurale Christianitatis Myth from an Imagological Perspective.” In *National Stereotyping, Identity Politics, European Crises*, edited by Jürgen Barkhoff and Joep Leerssen, 165. Brill, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctv1v7zbzt.13>.

¹⁵⁵ Haaland, Hege. “Polish Identity and Relations to Europe.” *Bulwark, Bridge, or Periphery?: Polish Discourse on Poland and Europe*. Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), 2001. 52. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep08080.6>.

“re-joining” Europe was framed with significant religious overtones, and the EU was not above using these associations to engender pro-European sentiments in new applicant states.¹⁵⁶ The messianic ideal of Poland’s historic sacrifices being validated by becoming integrated into a European core led by an EU influenced by Christian values was a strong motive for agreeing to the pro-European consensus in the country by the religious right and nationalist groups in the 1990s and 2000s, especially if this integration promoted Poland as a strong Catholic influence in European institutions and centring Christianity as a common denominator for European values and identity.¹⁵⁷ Even within Dariusz Rosati’s 1996 address to European leaders, he emphasizes Poland’s role as a victim to be saved by furthering connections with Europe and its values:

“There are not many countries in Europe that, like Poland, have suffered so deeply the tragic consequences of their own weakness and poor relations with their neighbours. We are therefore all the more pleased to see that for the first time in many, many years we now share a common legal framework for good neighbourly relations with all our neighbours. [...]”¹⁵⁸

The reality of EU integration dealt a striking blow to this belief that Polish accession would provide Poles, especially those within Catholic nationalist circles, with a connection to a Christian European identity. The battle over including a Christian preamble to a European Constitution in 2004 was an early example that the EU’s own conversations and formation of a European identity was moving in a different direction from Polish ideals of what being “European” entailed, namely in promoting secular view

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 54.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 55-56.

¹⁵⁸ Rosati, “Poland on its Way to the European Union”, 48.

on religious affiliation.¹⁵⁹ Because of this, the concept of the “Bulwark of Christianity” in Poland shifted within Catholic-nationalist circles. While nationalists used the imagery of the Bulwark as a way to intersect historical narratives with a pro-European and even pro-integrationist sentiment towards the European Union before Poland’s official accession into the union, that same imagery took on more Eurospectic qualities once nationalists found themselves in conflict with a pre-existing European identity that favoured a humanist and secular approach in considering who could identify as “European”.

This shift of what the “Bulwark of Christianity” meant to Poland in a post-accession situation saw the reformation of the Bulwark as a term that described Poland uniquely rather than something that provided a connection to Europe. In the current environment, the Bulwark has become a historical and empirical example of Poland’s role to protect Christianity from outside forces. One of these outside forces framed within Catholic-nationalist circles is the European Union itself, or at minimum certain elements within the union, particularly secular and socially liberal tendencies and policies. With PiS, the Bulwark of Christianity proved a viable way to frame Polish-EU relations and identify concerns: Poland, like in the early modern era, was battling against ideologies and forces that threatened the Church, and by extension, European unity through a shared Christian identity. This has been most notable in the present day in PiS’ adoption of anti-immigrant rhetoric, framing refugees, economic migrants, and others entering the European Union and Poland as a threat to the traditional values of the

¹⁵⁹ Black, “Christianity bedevils talks on EU treaty”, *The Guardian*.

continent and Christendom, especially during the height of the refugee crisis in the mid-2010s.¹⁶⁰

PiS' adoption of the Bulwark of Christianity as a Eurospectric rhetorical tool post-accession is not unique, however. A similar development has occurred in Hungary since the beginning of the right-wing populist Fidesz government under Viktor Orbán in 2010. Similarly to PiS, the use of the imagery of the Bulwark in Hungary framed government rhetoric during the mid-2010s refugee crisis, with Orbán's administration focusing on Hungary historical role as a victim and belligerent against the Ottoman Empire, and how these circumstances inform its current role in protecting Christian European values and identity from new enemies, namely the secular institutions of the European Union itself.¹⁶¹ The PiS and Fidesz regimes have built an alliance on these similar associations of viewing their nations as bastions of Christian values, and this has informed how Poland and Hungary operate within the European Union today, especially in what they view as the over-reaching arm of European institution on national matters.¹⁶²

For PiS, the Bulwark of Christianity creates a dichotomy between Poland and the modern-day European Union based on identity and national signifiers. Poland, to religious nationalists, represents a traditional Catholic society that due to its position as a defender of Christian values, has the responsibility of fight back against threats to this

¹⁶⁰ Santora, Marc. "Poland bashes immigrants, but quietly takes Christian ones". *New York Times*, 26 March 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/26/world/europe/immigration-poland-ukraine-christian.html>.

¹⁶¹ Blažević, "The Image of the Wall: The Antemurale Christianitatis Myth from an Imagological Perspective", 165

¹⁶² Liboreiro, Jorge. "Poland and Hungary hijack EU summit with anti-migration demands". *EuroNews*, 7 June 2023. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/06/30/poland-and-hungary-hijack-eu-summit-with-anti-migration-demands>.

religious cohesion. As one interviewee frames discussion of the Bulwark of Christianity, “The Polish nation is on the border of Christian civilization”, and this attitude can bleed into a sense of xenophobia and garrison mentality, with the interviewee expanding on their thoughts as the Bulwark being used to explain a mentality of “[that] we are white Christian Europeans [...], and we are going to fight for a white Christian Europe.”¹⁶³

This mentality of signifying Polish identity through not only religious affiliation but ethnicity and race shows the intersecting dimensions to identity-building, and how associating Polishness with the Catholic Church as a traditional entity and a unifying aspect can influence other factors of inclusion and exclusion. A key aspect since PiS return to government in 2015, however, is the deliberate exclusion of other Europeans, secular Poles, and even certain religious Poles, from the Polish nation through rhetoric that uses the Bulwark of Christianity and messianism as tools to not only define Polishness, but to limit it to those PiS and its allies view as properly Polish and reflective of the image of Poland that most closely resembles the party’s own identity.

6.3. What makes a Pole a Pole?

Polish identity has always proven itself both malleable and influenced heavily by the circumstances surrounding it. Within the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, one’s identity as Polish was based on elements such as class status, language, and loyalty towards the state and its institutions.¹⁶⁴ In the interbellum period between World Wars I and II, identity was a cause of debate, as questions were asked on who was to be

¹⁶³ Anonymous, interview by Joseph Fitkowski, October 2022, interview 1, transcript and recording.

¹⁶⁴ Backus, Oswald P. “The Problem of Unity in the Polish-Lithuanian State.” *Slavic Review* 22, no. 3 (1963): 422. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2492488>.

included within the new Polish state, with some like Roman Dmowski making impassioned arguments for limiting Polish nationhood to those of the Catholic faith.¹⁶⁵ In the communist period, the Church was used by both the government and opposition as an institution with political and societal clout that could provide legitimacy through association and identity-building with the institution in mind.

In the present-day, the PiS government has made a conscious effort to build on previous associations made between Polish nationalism and Catholicism, and has defined Poland, its domestic policies, and its foreign relationships through these terms and associations. Within this, PiS has framed Poles as a monolith, and as culturally, ethnically, and religiously homogenous. The goal of this association is twofold: it bolsters support in PiS' traditional nationalist and rural base, in which these narratives of Polish history and identity form a strong cultural bond and do have purchase as a sense of identity, and provides a way to exclude portions of society that the party deems "anti-Polish" or antithetical to the identifiers and signifiers of Polish nationhood.¹⁶⁶ In addition to the groups mentioned by Jacek Karnowski in his interview with *The Daily Compass* (which placed opposition politicians, civil society groups, and the LGBT+ movement as elements in a "total opposition"), Poles with pro-European sentiments and beliefs have also been framed by the government as being part of what Jarosław Kaczyński described as "the worst sort of Poles".¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ Hagen, William W. "Before the 'Final Solution': Toward a Comparative Analysis of Political Anti-Semitism in Interwar Germany and Poland." *The Journal of Modern History* 68, no. 2 (1996): 3. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2124667>.

¹⁶⁶ Grzymala-Busse, Anna. "Poland's Path to Illiberalism." *Current History* 117, no. 797 (2018): 96. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48614331>.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

While conducting interviews in Poland, all four of the interviewees identified that pro-European politics and sentiments have been rhetorically othered since PiS' return to government. In one instance, an interviewee noted that PiS-affiliated media has emphasized the pro-European sentiments of opposition politicians and media in order to create a populist narrative surrounding loyalty and identity, with pro-European Poles being defined as "EU-nations of Polish origin" and framed as an "other" influencing and changing Poland's cultural and religious underpinnings, and thus a threat to Polish identity.¹⁶⁸ Within defining pro-European sentiments as "anti-Polish", the government has played on these association with the European Union as dangerous and acting against Poland's sovereignty and wishes to maintain traditional cultural norms.

With the government's focus on taking control of state media since 2015, PiS-affiliated sources went on a barrage of attacks on pro-European opposition politicians, chief among them Donald Tusk. Tusk's already sour relations with the Kaczyńskis and PiS, alongside his open support towards integration during his tenure as Prime Minister from 2007 to 2014 and his successive move to become President of the European Council from 2014 to 2019, led PiS to easily paint him as a pro-foreign and pro-German operative willing to punish Poland through the legislation and sanctions of the European Union.

In this narrative, Donald Tusk is not Polish (at least, not in the framework PiS considers "Polishness"), but a foreign actor using European integration to enrich himself and use European institutions to influence and interfere in democratic reforms in Poland. And in many ways, Tusk's image within PiS-affiliated media is malleable and ever-

¹⁶⁸ Anonymous, interview by Joseph Fitkowski, November 2022, interview 2, transcript and recording.

changing. In conversations around domestic and economic policies, his tenure as Prime Minister is painted as overseeing the erosion of democratic institutions through corruption and pro-European policies that failed to include and benefit the average Pole.¹⁶⁹ In discussion of the European Union and its moves against the Polish government, Tusk's ancestry, family, and loyalty are questioned and criticized. Tusk's familial history as coming from a mixed Polish, German, and Kashubian (a linguistically and culturally related group to Poles from the northern region of Pomerania, that has until recently traditionally has been classified as a subgroup of the Polish) background has been weaponized by PiS as a point of critique towards Tusk's loyalty towards the Polish nation, framing him as an outsider and threat to the integrity of Polish culture and traditions. As President of the European Council, he was framed as a traitor by PiS-affiliated press, a bureaucrat willing to take away Poland's sovereignty for the benefit of the European Union.¹⁷⁰ His German heritage has also be emphasized to bolster anti-German sentiment within the readership of these magazines and newspapers, with one interviewee in November 2022 noting that within this consistently Eurosceptic space, anti-German sentiments have played a role of connecting modern-day politics to Polish collective traumas around German occupation and repression during the Partitions and World War II.¹⁷¹

More recently, as Tusk has returned to domestic politics in 2021 as leader once again of Civic Platform, PiS has returned to the 2010 Smolensk disaster as a way to

¹⁶⁹ Jaskiernia, "Authoritarian Tendencies in the Polish Political System", 159-160.

¹⁷⁰ Charlish, Alan and Anna Koper. "Poland's Tusk returns to frontline to face old foe Kaczynski." *Reuters*, 3 July 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/polands-tusk-returns-frontline-vowing-lead-opposition-victory-2021-07-03/>.

¹⁷¹ Anonymous, interview by Joseph Fitkowski, November 2022, interview 2, transcript and recording.

frame Tusk as culpable in the crash, and appeal to strong emotional beliefs and conspiracy theories surrounding the event.¹⁷² In the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Smolensk disaster has also been used as a way to paint Tusk as pro-Russian, assuming guilt and collusion with Vladimir Putin on either orchestrating the crash or excluding key information in the official investigation.¹⁷³

In light of the events in Ukraine, PiS has, as of this writing, passed a new law in June 2023 aimed at countering perceived Russian influence by allowing a commission selected by the government to investigate individual politicians for any connections to Russia that may be deemed undemocratic and a threat to state security.¹⁷⁴ The commission’s direct connection to the government has been criticized for giving PiS the legal power to investigate and (in the original draft of the act, before being removed due



Figure 6.2. Donald Tusk has been portrayed by PiS-affiliated and right-wing media a variety of ways to undermine Tusk’s own connection to Poland and the Polishness of his supporters and other pro-European Poles. These depictions range from a cosmopolitan European eroding Polish identity and culture through LGBT+ acceptance and non-Christian immigration (“God, save us from Tusk!”), emphasizing his German heritage, and more recently framing the former Prime Minister as pro-Russian or close to the Putin regime (“How Tusk handed over the Smolensk investigation to Putin”).

¹⁷² Easton, "Smolensk Tragedy Continues to Haunt Poland."

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Szczerbiak, Aleks. “How will the “Russian influence” commission affect this year’s Polish election.” *Notes from Poland*, 19 June 2023. <https://notesfrompoland.com/2023/06/19/how-will-the-russian-influence-commission-affect-this-years-polish-election/>.

to mass protests) bar opposition politicians from running in future elections, with Tusk being at the centre of the controversial law, especially since PiS-affiliated has re-emphasized the Smolensk disaster and positioned Tusk as a possible threat to Polish sovereignty not just through his connections to the European Union, but also his perceived connections to Russia within the Polish nationalist community.

In many ways, Donald Tusk acts as a singular person that PiS and its affiliated media can single out as a part of a larger threat of pro-European Poles, foreign media, and European intervention. The accusations and depictions hurled at Tusk are similarly enlarged to paint a large swath of Polish society as anti-Polish and corrupted by their pro-European views and beliefs.¹⁷⁵ PiS, in controlling state media and setting an agenda of reform and consolidation within political institutions, has framed opposition to their policies as not just disagreement, but as form of cultural and societal treason. The existence of the “total opposition” is, to Jarosław Kaczyński in the runup to the 2023 parliamentary election, risking the end of the Polish nation.¹⁷⁶ In a letter directed to readers of the right-wing daily *Gazeta Polska*, Kaczyński states:

“Poland [should] be able to pursue a policy, both internal and external, serving the Polish state and national interests [...] But, as we well know, our aspirations to build [such a] republic are not to everyone’s taste. Various foreign centres, with Berlin at the forefront, supported by Polish *comprador* groups, would like to turn our country away from the path of political and economic independence, to narrow our development prospects [...] The European mainstream liberal-left dreams of annihilating the old world, including our identity and collective memory, and forging a new man and a

¹⁷⁵ Stańczyk, Ewa. “Caught between Germany and Russia: Memory and National Identity in Poland’s Right-Wing Media Post-2004.” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 91, no. 2 (2013): 304–305. <https://doi.org/10.5699/slaveasteurorev2.91.2.0289>.

¹⁷⁶ Tilles, Daniel. “Opposition election victory would mean “end of Poland”, warns Kaczyński.” *Notes from Poland*, 27 May 2023. <https://notesfrompoland.com/2023/05/27/opposition-election-victory-would-mean-end-of-poland-warns-kaczynski/>.

new society [...] If we want to continue to face them down effectively, we must win the autumn elections, so that we can continue on the path of building and strengthening a homeland that is sovereign in spirit, strong in economy, safe, prosperous, just and solidary. The republic cannot afford for the patriotic camp to lose these elections [...] The rule of the total opposition can mean only one thing: *finis Poloniae* [the end of Poland].”¹⁷⁷

This letter shows an intersection with PiS’ use of identity as a political tool, a rhetorical device, and as a way to justify the party’s actions in government. The increased politicization of state media and the judiciary was a way to not just bolster PiS’ control over governmental affairs, but deny the opposition the possibility of re-entering government and risking the collapse of the Polish state to cosmopolitan values and European interference. This, as well, directly leads into PiS’ embrace of illiberal democracy and Catholic nationalism as an identifier of Polishness. PiS’ own stated mission throughout its second tenure in government is the protection of Polish identity through necessary reforms to state institutions, and to succeed in this mission, a definition of “Polish” must be adopted and the government must gain control of agencies and organizations they believe diminish or threaten this

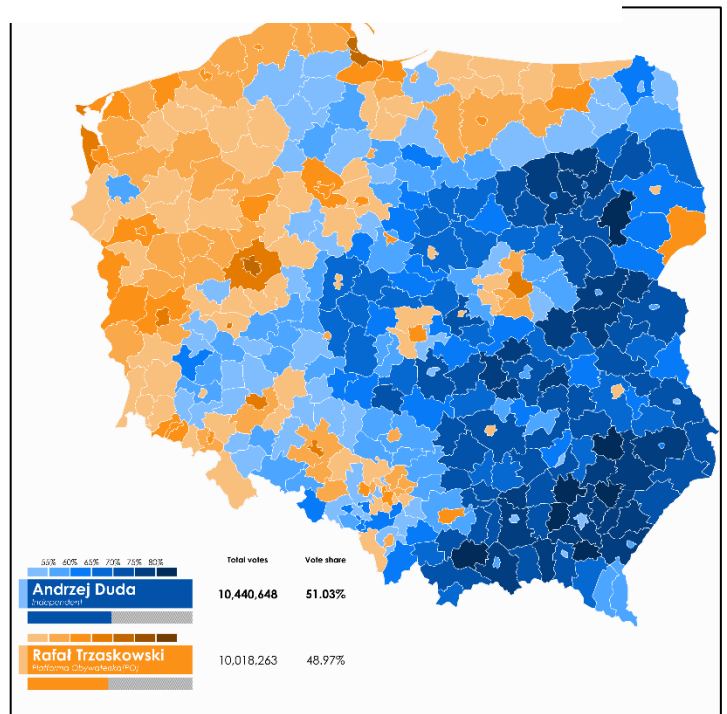


Figure 6.3. The results of the 2020 Polish presidential election, in which incumbent Andrzej Duda (backed by PiS, in blue) narrowly defeated Civic Platform challenger and mayor of Warsaw Rafal Trzaskowski (in orange). PiS retained significant support in the rural and conservative east, while failing to take large cities and notable portions of the west of Poland. During their time in government, PiS has actively framed urban centres and the west of the country as anti-Polish and a threat to the party’s goal of ridding corruptive influences from government and judicial positions.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

“Polishness”.¹⁷⁸ Therefore, to be “Polish” to PiS is not just an connection of linguistic, cultural, or ethnic similarities, but a sense of loyalty to PiS itself and to its project. Any opposition to the party and its policies are thus framed as inherently against Poland’s right to sovereignty and to need to bring about a “Fourth Republic”, a term PiS used during its 2005-2007 stint in government to describe a hypothetical Poland free from post-communist influences.¹⁷⁹

If being “Polish” is defined by one’s association to PiS and its affiliated institutions (most importantly the Catholic Church), a failure to show loyalty to either the party or its associated signifiers is seen as a betrayal, and has led to PiS widely painting liberal and pro-European as corrupted, anti-Polish, and suspectable to foreign influences from the West.¹⁸⁰ In this, PiS has used pre-existing socio-geographical divisions to create a rhetoric of dichotomies around areas of low support for the party (typically in the west of the country and most large cities) and high support (rural communities and the east of Poland). The west and urban parts of the country (often called “Poland A”, a distinction originally related to stronger post-World War I economic development in the west) are viewed by PiS and its associates as a compromised part of the country, suspectable to liberal sentiments and attitude that are considered unacceptable to the party. This has been most notable in discussions of LGBT+ rights in Poland since PiS’ return to government, and how the party has framed LGBT+ activists and allies as a danger to traditional values, and one that is funded and influenced by European elites.

¹⁷⁸ Cienski, Jan. “Polish media veers back to 1989”. *Politico*, 11 July 2016. <https://www.politico.eu/article/polish-tv-viewers-turn-off-tune-out-drop-out-poland-kaczynski/>.

¹⁷⁹ Stańczyk, “Caught between Germany and Russia: Memory and National Identity in Poland’s Right-Wing Media Post-2004”, 289-290.

¹⁸⁰ Tilles, “Opposition election victory would mean “end of Poland”, warns Kaczyński.”

This focus on LGBT+ rights as a threat to a Polish way of life has been a central tenant of PiS rhetoric since the party's campaigns in 2019 for the European Parliament and *Sejm*, respectively. The party has used its control of state media to further this message, including airing a documentary painting the LGBT+ movement as an invasion from the European Union and the West in general.¹⁸¹ This campaign proved successful in mobilizing the Catholic Church, right-wing news outlets, and the PiS support base to return the party to the second term in government through a campaign of fear towards the loss of Poland due to the influence of foreign actors and those Poles who align with pro-Europeanism, socially liberal values, or other persuasions deemed problematic to the administration.¹⁸²

During his campaign for re-election to the presidency in 2020, Andrzej Duda engaged in a strong rhetoric around LGBT+ rights as a foreign force, stating during a campaign stop in southwestern town of Brzeg, equating the movement with the former communist regime and the perceived indoctrination of children into a dangerous community:

“[The former communist regime] was Bolshevism, it was the ideologizing of children. Today, there are also attempts to push an ideology on us and our children, but different. It's totally new, but it is also neo-Bolshevism [...]. We have our tradition. We have our culture that is based on over 1,050 years of history. We won't allow [Poland] to be taken away from us. We won't let any ideology, neither communist, nor socialist, nor any other take it away

¹⁸¹ Bretan, Juliette. “Court orders Polish state broadcaster TVP to take down online anti-LGBT film”. *Notes from Poland*, 8 June 2020. <https://notesfrompoland.com/2020/06/08/court-orders-polish-state-broadcaster-tvp-to-take-down-online-anti-lgbt-film/>.

¹⁸² Kalan, Dariusz. “In Poland's Upcoming election, the Law and Justice Party Is Demonizing the LGBT Community to Win”. *Foreign Policy*, 9 October 2019. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/09/poland-pis-demonizing-lgbt-community-win-upcoming-elections/>.

from us, because this is our identity. And let no one try to lead our children on the wrong path because we won't allow it.”¹⁸³

This attitude has been bolstered by the Catholic Church, who has positioned itself once again as a protector of Polish culture and traditions against a “invasion” of LGBT+ activists and concepts from a nebulous secular “West”. Oftentimes, as seen with Duda, these beliefs are couched in an appeal to historical traumas that provide a sense of victimization, and therefore, a need to fight back with religious fervour. The Archbishop of Kraków, Marek Jędraszewski, stated in 2019 an extremely similar statement to Duda’s, framing LGBT+ rights as a “rainbow plague” that that Church and the state must fight against, just as it had to Soviet Marxism in the 1980s: “Our land is no longer affected by the red plague, which does not mean that there is no new one that wants to control our souls, hearts and minds [...] Not Marxist, [...] but born of the same spirit, neo-Marxist. Not red, but rainbow.”¹⁸⁴ Similar sentiments were visible in local and voivodeship (provincial) legislation that declared these entities as “LGBT-free zones” between 2019 and 2021, which emphasized a need to protect traditional Polish family values from a outside force attempting to break apart community cohesion.¹⁸⁵

PiS’ anti-LGBT rhetoric, and its influence on social policy over the party’s time in government, has been perhaps one of the most visible examples of the party othering groups incompatible with its view of Poland and Polish identity, and how this othering

¹⁸³ Milton, John. “Poland’s president says being LGBT+ is an ‘ideology’ worse than communism: ‘They are trying to convince us that they are people’”. *PinkNews*, 14 June 2020. <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2020/06/14/poland-president-andrzej-duda-law-justice-communism/>.

¹⁸⁴ Reuters. “Unrest feared as Poland Catholic church doubles down on anti-gay rhetoric”. *NBC News*, 2 August 2019. <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/unrest-feared-poland-catholic-church-doubles-down-anti-gay-rhetoric-n1038656>.

¹⁸⁵ Picheta and Kottasová, “‘You Don’t Belong Here’: In Poland ‘LGBT-free zones,’ existing is an act of defiance.” *CNN*.

through narratives of Poland's right to sovereignty and history has conflicted with EU narratives around common human rights throughout the union. Alongside the currently ongoing constitutional and judicial crisis started by PiS' push for domestic reforms to consolidate political power within the party and its associates, the LGBT+ debate in Poland shows a separation on what being "European" means (and what that identity entails) in both Brussels and Warsaw, and that is conflict puts PiS in a position where they feel a need to fight for the preservation of their idea of Poland and its identity as a Catholic and European state.

6.4. The conflict of European values

With the material presented above, it is understandable to believe that PiS in 2023 is a hardline Eurosceptic party willing to break from the EU in a "Polexit" if its concerns are not alleviated, and if what it views as EU interference continues. In reality, the party has actually maintained its cautious soft Eurosceptic approach from the early and mid-2000s, but this relationship has evolved alongside the changing roles and positions the EU and the Polish government have filled in the near twenty years of membership in the supranational organization. Economically, Poland remains a net beneficiary of EU subsidiaries, and EU funding remains an important factor in Poland's financial and economic health.¹⁸⁶ Because of these circumstances, PiS rarely brings up the economic connections between Poland and the European Union at-large as a point of contention, and in fact this situation remains PiS' most notable pro-European aspect

¹⁸⁶ Kundera, Jarosław. "Poland in the European Union. The Economic Effects of Ten Years of Membership." *Rivista Di Studi Politici Internazionali* 81, no. 3 (323) (2014): 378–379. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43580712>.

within the party, primarily with the strong association in the minds of Poles with European accession and economic stability.¹⁸⁷

As such, PiS has attempted to frame itself as not anti-EU, but instead as questioning the current trajectory of the union, especially on matters of social values and integration. Much like its previous concerns in the early 2000s, the party emphasizes the benefits of the EU as a solely economic project; anything outside of that is framed charitable as the overextension of Brussels, or more pessimistically the active destruction of Polish social values through integration. This creates an interesting conflict in rhetoric, especially around periods of elections to the European Parliament, as PiS has actively attacked the European Union as a destructive force to Poland itself, but exists in an environment where membership in the EU is still seen as a net economic and financial benefit for Poland. In turn, the party directs its Euroscepticism at not leaving the union, but ensuring that Poland's position within it is secured through maintaining its political sovereignty from Brussels. The main separation from this attitude is that of identity, that the European Union, in the mind of PiS is overextending its influence and power to change the social fabric of its member states through socially liberal and left-wing causes. PiS is not against the EU as an organization in its entirety, but its belief in a strong Christian identity being needed to understand and engage with Europe certainly places it in a conflicting position to the Union's more secular-focused elites and institutions, alongside the party's notable democratic backsliding butting up against the European Union's own strong identifiers with liberal democracy and the separation of powers.

¹⁸⁷ Balcer, "Poland: 'Good Change', Bad Change", 104.

PiS' unique form of Euroscepticism, created through the specific circumstances of Polish membership and the need to acquiesce to some remaining part a of pro-European consensus (that Poland still economically benefits from its association with the EU), creates the positions PiS emphasize and de-emphasizes when discussing European integration. In economic terms, PiS has only publicly and verbally clashed on environmental policy with the EU since its return to government in 2015, with the party continually protesting further regulation towards the coal industry (which still supplies the majority of the country's electricity), and even in this situation, the party has shown the ability to address European concerns through compromise and shifting policy.¹⁸⁸ However, these statements frame the EU as misguided and intrusive towards the domestic realities of its member states, and not a existential threat to Poland's electricity production. PiS has attempted to assuage pro-European opponents through dismiss fears of a "Polexit", or a Polish secession from the organization: Poland will never leave the EU, it just wants to see the institution changed.

This, however, is not how the European Union is framed on matters of national identity, social policy, and furthering integration. Here, as we have seen above, PiS takes a much more aggressive approach, as reform and the need to protect Poland's sovereignty is framed as not a benefit to the country, but as a necessity for its very survival. Within this, PiS emphasizes its role as protector of Polish values from European elites, that this narrative has been strengthened by responses by the European Union itself. Alongside the 2021 declaration of the EU being a "LGBTIIQ Freedom

¹⁸⁸ Kość, Wojciech. "Poland's PiS tweaks climate policy" *Politico*, 22 November 2019. <https://www.politico.eu/article/polands-pis-tweaks-climate-policy/>.

Zone” that opened this paper, the European Union has attempted to use legal sanctions and instruments to bring PiS away from what the EU views as Poland drifting away from integration and towards illiberal democracy.¹⁸⁹

This situation, of a tug-of-war between EU institutions and the Polish government, has been framed as a war of culture and identity as much as it has been framed a war between interpretations of judicial independence, sovereignty, and civil rights. Just as PiS has centred its policies and rhetoric around a national identity of Polish sovereignty, victimhood, and the need to preserve traditions, the European Union has attempted to form its own pan-European identity on the basis of a communal respect for liberal democracy, secularism, some consensus on free market principles, and the rule of law. In fact, many of these are stipulations in the 1993 Copenhagen Criteria, ensuring that new member states will, assumedly, fit into this paradigm. The issue, that PiS is actively bringing Poland out of that paradigm, has in many ways caused a crisis of identity within the European Union. Can its attempt to build a core identity around its institutions survive member states disengaging with this identity?

On 20 December 2017, the European Commission formally invoked Article 7 of the Treaty of the European Union against the Polish government and its reforms to the country’s judicial branch, which the European Commission stated constituted a breach in the union’s commitment to the separation of powers and liberal democratic institutions. Article 7 stipulates that the European Commission can revoke certain rights, such as voting rights, from a member state if the Commission believes the member state is a risk

¹⁸⁹ Savage, Rachael. "European Parliament demands EU action over Poland LGBT+ rights breaches." *Reuters*, 17 September 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-lgbt-poland-idUSKBN2682L3>.

to European cohesion, democratic rule, or other factors that go against the union's legal structure.¹⁹⁰ The invoking of Article 7 on Poland was caused by, according to the Commission,

“The [adoption of] more than 13 laws affecting the entire structure of the justice system in Poland, impacting the Constitutional Tribunal, Supreme Court, ordinary courts, National Council for the Judiciary, prosecution service and National School of Judiciary. The common pattern is that the executive and legislative branches have been systematically enabled to politically interfere in the composition, powers, administration and functioning of the judicial branch.”¹⁹¹

Article 7, however, failed to pass the European Council (an agency of the EU comprised of the member state's heads of the state and government) due to the need for a unanimous vote (excluding, of course, the accused member state). Hungary's vote against the invocation against Poland stopped the proceedings, and showed that a bloc of right-wing Eurosceptic governments within the European Union were willing to use the very institutions and instruments of the EU to their benefit, as the need for unanimity blocks a number of regulatory legislations and sanctions.¹⁹² This is especially notable considering the relationship between Hungary's and Poland's current governments, and their promotion of each other as ideal European states within the structure of the European Union. Jarosław Kaczyński has been open on “creating a Budapest in Warsaw”, and has seemingly followed a similar line to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in attempting to construct an illiberal democratic order through the consolidation

¹⁹⁰ “Rule of Law: European Commission acts to defend judicial independence in Poland”. European Commission. 20 December 2017. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_17_5367.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² "Rule of law situation in Poland has deteriorated: European Parliament." *Reuters*, 17 September 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-poland-ruleoflaw-idUSKBN2681U7>.

of state and private media, and an aggressive view on the country's history through nationalist narratives.¹⁹³

Despite the existence of this bloc and the inability to move forward with instruments such as Article 7, the Polish government under PiS has seen movement against it by European institutions through the repeal and blockage of funding towards community and inter-member state initiatives. This situation of using funds as an indicator of disapproval and a rejection of PiS' reforms to Poland's institutions has led to circumstances where two main developments have occurred. Firstly, PiS' position on the European Union as a primarily economic community, and Poland's position as a beneficiary of this economic union, have allowed Brussels the ability to use funding as a way to place pressure PiS-led policies and local legislation. This has been most notable in a decision to remove a funding package worth 1.5 billion euros to powiat (municipal) and voivodeship governments that introduced "LGBT-free" legislation, with a significant portion of these governments removing these laws to regain access to what was viewed by some local governments as critical funding.¹⁹⁴ Similarly, the decision to freeze nearly €35.4 billion in funding for post-COVID economic recovery over the Polish government's continued consolidation of control over the judicial branch has brought has brought factions of PiS in conflict with itself and its allies or whether to acquiesce to EU pressure to release the funding or double down on its legislation in response to the EU.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ Buckley, Neil and Henry Foy, "Poland's new government finds a model in Orban's Hungary".

¹⁹⁴ Wlodarczak-Semczuk, Anna and Foo Yun Chee. "EU warns Polish regions they could lose funding over 'LGBT-free' zones". *Reuters*, 6 September 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-warns-polish-regions-they-could-lose-funding-over-lgbt-free-zones-2021-09-06/>.

However, the EU's ability to hold funding hostage to affect Polish policy matters has also emboldened PiS' rhetoric of fighting European interference in domestic affairs and has provided the government a way to frame the European Union as a force jeopardizing Poland's need to rid its institutions from "post-communists" and those deemed anti-Polish, most notably in domestic media.¹⁹⁶ With the EU threatening the Polish government's access to what has been deemed critical funding, PiS has just as much gone on the offensive against Brussels as it has relinquished to pressure from the supranational organization, and it appears that the party has separated its messaging. Domestically, PiS had remained heavily critical of the EU's social policies and interference, and has delved deeper into positioning the EU as a danger and threat to Polish values and Poland's sovereignty as a nation-state.¹⁹⁷ In foreign affairs, PiS has emphasized its position towards a "Europe of nations"; against increased federalization, but willing to remain within the EU as long as the union remains predominantly concerned with economic and financial matters, and away from dictating the social policies, cultural norms, and political reforms of its member states.¹⁹⁸

Within this, PiS has framed Polish identity as not opposing a pan-European identity, but embracing a view of Europe (and thus its identity and main signifiers) as deeply influenced by Christianity, and its history as a Christian continent through the use of historical narratives such as the Bulwark of Christianity and Poland's victimhood

¹⁹⁵ Rankin, Jennifer. "European Commission takes Poland to court over 'legal Polesxit'". *The Guardian*, 15 February 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/15/european-commission-takes-poland-to-court-over-legal-polesxit>.

¹⁹⁶ Buras, Piotr. "Poland's new tune in Europe". *Politico*, 20 August 2019. <https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-pis-europe-rules-new-tune/>.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

through a messianic lens. As such, PiS has positioned Poland as *serce Europy* (“the heart of Europe”), an alternative narrative to European liberalism and secularism that emphasizes the history and narratives of nation-states over a broader European connection.¹⁹⁹ This rhetoric also connects to PiS’ goal of a moral revolution and its underpinnings in Polish messianism, as a renewed Polish state based on its position as the “Christ of Nations”, and rid of the liberal social and political influences that PiS believes hobbles the country’s development, can (in the eye of Polish Catholic-nationalists) position itself as a Christian leader in the European Union, and an alternative to Western liberalism and secular democracy.²⁰⁰

With PiS operationalizing Poland’s history to define the country as a conservative European state, and aligning with a specific view of Europe, the European Union has had a difficulty forming a counter-narrative to PiS’ focus on national sovereignty, traditionalism, and Christian identity. The European Union, as a collection of varying member states, has a vested interest in creating an identity for itself that is equally malleable, as to find purchase in a multicultural and multireligious continent, and to bolster European institutions and provide legitimacy to the European project as a whole. In attempting to creating a pan-European identity, the European Union has

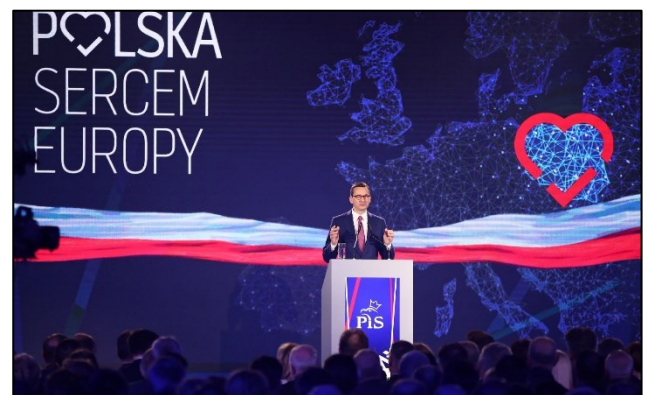


Figure 6.4. In the 2019 elections for the European Parliament, PiS adopted the slogan *Polska sercem Europy* (“Poland, the heart of Europe”) during the campaign. This slogan showed the dichotomy PiS faced between rhetoric aimed at domestic and European stages, as the governing party attempted to woo voters by assuaging fears of a “Polexit” by re-affirming Poland’s continued commitment to EU membership, while simultaneously positioning Poland as an example of an alternative identity for Europe.

¹⁹⁹ Buras, “Poland’s new tune in Europe”.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

developed a form of identity-building around the organization's institutions and legislation, and connecting the union inherently with the notions of liberal democracy, the rule of law, and free market principles.²⁰¹ However, creating a shared identity through bureaucratic institutions and economic policy has proven difficult, as stronger associations to states, ethnicity, religion affiliation, and regions within member states remain dominant.²⁰² In centring discussions on the European Union as a battle of cultural values and societal norms, PiS has been able to gain a stronger position domestically with Poles who already identify strongly with Poland as a part of their identity, and with the signifiers of that identity that PiS emphasized.

Conversely, the European Union has failed in some form to construct an identity that extends outside the organization's preview of economic growth and the expansion of liberal democratic values. In this, the EU faces a challenge in overcoming stronger national and regional identities within their member states that can use established historical narratives and national institutions to promote their own interests and views of Europe, and what it means to be "European" in their own mindsets. For PiS, this weak sense of identity to the EU as an institution allows the party to define Polishness through loyalty to the state and its policies. Liberal democratic values are othered as a threat to social cohesion, and established institution, such as the Catholic Church, are bolstered as a way for Poland to regain its sovereignty and role in a Christian Europe. Any who oppose this narrative are simply deemed to not be of the nation, and othered as foreign

²⁰¹ Guibernau, Montserrat. "Prospects for a European Identity." *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 24, no. 1/2 (2011): 35–36. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41478274>.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 36-37.

actors, self-hating Poles, or simply not part of the society envisioned by PiS and its allies, especially if their position as a vanguard of this movement is threatened.

It is under these circumstances that Polish democracy has been viewed as under risk by the European Union. The goal of PiS to consolidate power in order to reform institutions and bolster a specific view of Polish identity has led to a clash between what it means ultimately to be “European”, and this conflict has affected Poland’s commitment to liberal democracy, European integration, and its government’s own relationship with Poles that do not fit into PiS’ own view of Polish identity.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion

In interviews with academics in Poland in the autumn of 2022, a notable point of consensus between interviewees was the statement that the European Union ultimately did not understand what was occurring in Poland, and that the conflict was a final breakaway from the pro-European consensus that once dominated political discourse in the country in the 1990s and 2000s.²⁰³ Within this shifting landscape, PiS has put forward a historical narrative around Polish identity that emphasizes the role of the Catholic Church as a protector and signifier of Poland's history as a Christian state, and promotes Poland as a nation primed to set the European Union on a course away from liberal secularism and towards a more traditionalist and religiously-focused continental identity. In this goal, PiS has developed an ability to use Polish institutions, and the history around them, as a tool to form a rhetoric around this identity and appeal to narratives that paint Poland as a victim, a martyr, and, in its relationship with the European Union, defiant in the struggle for traditional Polish values against both foreign and domestic threats.

The ability for PiS to use this nationalist rhetoric is based on the trajectory of Polish politics and identity-building in the aftermath of democratization in the 1980s and 1990s. The appeal to connecting the fledgling democratic Polish state to both the Catholic Church and the European Union was a dominating force in a key period of reassessing what a Poland heading into the 21st would look like. The Catholic Church, using its

²⁰³ Anonymous, interview by Joseph Fitkowski, October to December 2022, interviews 1-4, transcript and recording.

political and social clout built up during its relationship with the Solidarity trades union and opposition to the communist regime, emerged as a powerful institution able to position itself as a key political actor in shaping Polish identity and influencing policy within the new political culture. As a dominant institution, the Church has successfully used its historical position as a way to define Polishness since the 19th century, and political groupings, especially those ascribing to Catholic-nationalist narratives, have made sure that the Church remains a key decision-maker and influence within the ostensibly secular state. With this development, the current government led by PiS has bolstered this connection as a cornerstone of Polish identity politics, and has enmeshed itself to the institution of the Church to the point where the two have become reliant on each other for support.²⁰⁴

Likewise, the formation of a pro-European consensus in Polish political spaces in the 1990s has shaped Polish membership in the supranational organization, even after this consensus has seemingly broke apart in the wake of successful Eurosceptic pushback after Poland's accession in 2004. Despite PiS very clearly viewing the European Union as a present danger to the country's social fabric, and actively othering those Poles who hold pro-European sentiments, Poland's position as a member of the European Union in an economic sense (and more importantly, the role of EU funding to many Polish institutions) has meant that PiS remains at least in some form committed to the European project, even if it differs significantly from the goals and beliefs of European elites and institutions themselves.

²⁰⁴ Skóra, "In Poland, the Catholic church backed abortion bans and authoritarian politics. Young people are turning away."

The role that institutions play in this conflict, especially as they surround narratives around identity and history, provide a connection between this case study of Poland and historical institutionalist thought. These narratives about Poland's position in Europe through a messianic lens, and PiS' reverence for the Catholic Church as a cultural institution stem from historical factors borne from the loss of independence in 1795, the question around who constitutes the Polish nation in a period of political and cultural repression during the Partitions and the interwar period, and the positioning of the Church and a connection to Europe as cornerstones of that identity building after democratization. These historical factors, especially those that place Polish identities and associations in question, are junctures that place Polish identity on a path that, in the words of James Mahoney, "once [...] is selected [in a critical juncture], it becomes progressively more difficult to return to the initial point when multiple alternatives were still available."²⁰⁵ The Catholic Church and a deep association with Europe as a cultural signifier have become engrained into Polish identity narratives through critical junctures (such as Poland's loss of independence and later democratization) that have allowed these associations to take hold, and PiS has been active in working around these associations and paths to emphasize and de-emphasize differing aspects of this historical evolution of "Polishness" to fit its own narratives around Poland's relationship to Europe and itself.

Through the analysis of PiS' use of historical narratives in its contemporary relationship to the European Union, the framework of historical institutionalism shows

²⁰⁵ Capoccia and Kelemen, "The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism", 347.

the evolution of Polish institutions, and why the evolution of these institutions is important to Polish identity-building in the 21st century. The main critical juncture in the development of messianism as an element in Polish nationalism, that of the lose of independence in 1795 and the need to define what “Polishness” entailed in the 19th century, solidified the Church as a cultural and political institution through path dependence and further critical junctures, including the positioning of the Church as a legitimate political actor in the fledging democratic Polish state in the 1980s and 1990s. This process has continued into the present day, as the relationship between Poles and the Catholic Church, alongside other signifiers of Polish identity, shift and change in a polarizing environment bolstered by PiS’ rhetoric towards those it considers outside the Polish nation. Here, historical institutionalist thought and historical narratives merge in showing the evolution of Polish institutions and their relation to identity historically, and how this has effected rhetoric, policy, and a sense of nationhood in the present day.

7.1. Does the European Union understand Poland?

One interviewee during research conducted in the autumn of 2022 stated that “most European politicians can’t understand what is happening in Poland,” and that “[this lack of understanding] is *habitus*, it does not occur to you”.²⁰⁶ In stating that the European Union lacks a understanding of what is occurring in Poland, the interviewee was expanding on a thought that PiS’ use of identity and historical narratives as a way to bolster support and consolidate power within its administration was based on a view of

²⁰⁶ Anonymous, interview by Joseph Fitkowski, October 2022, interview 1, transcript and recording.

identity-building that, in being so specific to the circumstances of Poland and its history, was difficult outside the country to grasp.²⁰⁷ This was seconded by another interviewee, who stated that “Law and Justice apply this nuclear rhetoric [...] the kind of suicidal rhetoric [...]. In this they mobilize this old Polish tendency for a suicidal uprising, and this is something the EU doesn’t get.”

With PiS identifying itself with a view of Poland that emphasizes martyrdom and defiance against what it considers key signifiers of Polish nationhood, a separation has occurred between the factors around Polish and European identity-building in the 21st century. Whereas Polish nationalism and identity, at least through Catholic-nationalist lenses, strongly emphasize historical trauma and the inherent or primordial nature of certain institutions, such as the Catholic Church, the European Union instead emphasizes its identity-building through legal institutions and a more abstract association with values that are viewed as “liberal democratic.” In this way, Polish and EU identity-building are based on differing factors and circumstances, and this reality can be difficult for those outside these circumstances to understand.

To a Western European, PiS’ move to consolidate power within the party and promote a socially conservative and Eurosceptic viewpoint may be viewed outside the necessary needed context of how Polish identity, especially within nationalists spaces, place Poland’s history and the experiences of Polish peoples (and other communities and groups connected to them) since the 19th century. These experiences and circumstances have painted a strong belief that Poland exists as a martyr for a Christian Europe, and, in much the same way the Catholic Church is viewed as a protector of Polish culture, Poland is framed similarly by PiS and its allies as a protector of traditional European

²⁰⁷ Anonymous, interview by Joseph Fitkowski, December 2022, interview 3, transcript and recording.

values, at whatever cost to liberal democratic values, which are framed as a threat to this cohesion.

With this use of narrative as a tool to define Polishness, PiS has engaged in a project meant to reform Polish institutions away from what the party has framed as control by post-communist, anti-Polish provocateurs, and EU-influenced bureaucrats, and towards “Polonizing” key democratic institutions and media outlets, often with the side-effects of positioning PiS itself as a beneficiary of these reforms through increased involvement with these institutions, such as judicial courts. Through these reforms, PiS has begun constructing an illiberal democratic regime, built on the consolidation of state media, the wide dissemination of the party’s narratives around Polish identity and engagement with the European Union, and, most importantly, the use of these narratives to maintain an “us versus them” mentality around its policies, creating an environment where loyalty to PiS’ project is a mark of being a part of the Polish nation, and any opposition to said policies is framed as “total opposition”, and to be discarded with other groups deemed as “anti-Polish” by the party, namely groups painted as being influenced by Western European social norms, such as the LGBT+ community.

Another important element to this is that of messianism and the centrality of Catholic identity to narratives on Polishness. Borne out of a need to create an identity after the collapse and dismantling of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious bound by loyalty to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and its own political institutions, Polish messianism is a response to that trauma of national loss, and an appeal of forging a national identity on an institution that could provide the means of cultural preservation during periods of repression. This belief in a messianic mission for Poland has deeply influenced the understanding of what it is to *be* Polish, and as such has given the Church

the societal clout that affords the institution to remain a political player in a constitutionally secular state. It has also greatly influenced politics to the degree that PiS has been able to use this notion of Catholic nationalism as not just a ideological position to justify its policies and form a consistent narrative of traditional Catholic Poland, but by also creating the circumstances for excluding those who do not fall within the parameters of this specific notion of Polish identity, and frame them as not loyal to Poland as a nation. Even liberal and left-wing Catholics within Poland are framed as a threat to Polish identity and the institutionalized Catholic Church by PiS, as this narrative of the Church being the sole (or at least, most dominant) definer of being Polish and being *of* Poland as a national state.²⁰⁸

By positioning Polishness as reliant on loyalty to the state (and by extension, the governing party), PiS has created a polarized environment around the country's future, both domestically and within the European Union. By adopting a messianic lens to view Polish identity, the Catholic Church has become a more openly political institution, to the benefit of PiS' and its more conservative and religious base. However, the close connection of organized religion to political policy has led to a crisis of faith for many Poles, especially those with liberal and left-wing persuasions, and as such, the Church has begun to lose its position as a protector of Polish values within urban and liberal spaces in the country, with Poland now considered one the fastest secularizing states within Europe.²⁰⁹ This has followed the polarization between urban and conservative

²⁰⁸ Anonymous, interview by Joseph Fitkowski, December 2022, interview 3, transcript and recording.

²⁰⁹ Pilawa, Konstanty. "The politicization of the church is accelerating Poland's secularisation." *Notes from Poland*, 22 January 2021. <https://notesfrompoland.com/2021/01/22/the-politicisation-of-the-church-is-accelerating-polands-secularisation/>.

Poland over the last two decades, and PiS' rhetoric against urban Poland during its time in government as part of the "total opposition" has seemingly strengthened this divide. As such, liberal and left-wing Poles have shown an openness to discussing civil rights causes that previously have been marginalized or framed by PiS as "anti-Polish", ranging from a growing acceptance of the LGBT+ community within these spaces, to a strengthening sense of pro-European sentiments and re-contextualization of Poland's history with minority groups.²¹⁰ While PiS' rhetoric and use of a nationalist narrative to bolster existing support proved successful in winning elections since 2015, it has also alienated many Poles outside of its base of support, and with slipping poll numbers, there is now a risk that PiS could re-enter opposition in the October 2023 parliamentary elections.²¹¹ In response to this possibility, Jarosław Kaczyński has framed an opposition win in the election as "the end of Poland."²¹² The risk of PiS losing control is, to the party, the risk of Polish culture and identity being subsumed and ultimately destroyed western values, and this belief has only strengthened PiS' move towards conspiratorial thinking and illiberal policies in order to strengthen this narrative of a new Polish Republic free of post-communist influence.

This desperation shown by PiS around the 2023 election shows a real fear within the party that Poland and its identity as a Catholic state is in danger if the opposition claims victory. The government's reforms to the judicial branch and the consolidation of state media is certainly to the party's physical benefit as a government, and what

²¹⁰ Donadio, Rachel. "The Dark Consequences of Poland's New Holocaust Law." *The Atlantic*, 8 February 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/02/poland-holocaust-law/552842/>.

²¹¹ Ojewska, Natalia. "Poland ruling party sees support slip before vote, poll shows." *Bloomberg*, 8 May 2023. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-05-08/poland-ruling-party-sees-support-slip-before-vote-poll-shows#xj4y7vzkg>.

²¹² Tilles, "Opposition election victory would mean "end of Poland."

dominates the discussion of democratic backsliding under PiS, but it must also be stated that, to PiS, there is also the very real belief that Poland's institutions, as they stand now, *are* compromised by post-communists, "EU-nations of Polish origins", and other anti-Polish elements. The discussion over further integration within the European Union has bolstered these fears, and has given PiS an antagonist to direct their fears and anxieties at. PiS may not want to leave the European Union in a "Polexit", as the economic benefits are too important to Poland, but the party does view the EU, as an organization identified with social liberalism and further integration, as a significant threat to their goals of a new Polish position in Europe based on messianism and Catholic nationalism.

7.2. What now?

As of this writing, Poland under PiS' government remains a thorn in the side of the European project, and attempts at further integration have seemingly halted as the European Union is faced by a growing tide of Eurosceptic governments and political groups.²¹³ PiS is not alone in Europe for using historical narratives as a justification for democratic backsliding and the consolidation of political power, with Hungary under Viktor Orbán especially being a close ally to PiS and its reforms, and other European nationalist groups attaching themselves to imagined or revised historical narratives that bolster exclusionary policies and Eurosceptic views.

In the case of PiS, Polish identity has been framed by this messianic lens as requiring a deep connection to Catholicism, and a reverence to such a specific view to

²¹³ Silver, Laura. "Populists in Europe – especially those on the right – have increased their vote shares in recent elections." *Pew Research Centre*, 6 October 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/10/06/populists-in-europe-especially-those-on-the-right-have-increased-their-vote-shares-in-recent-elections/>.

the Catholic Church that even Catholic dissidents to this narrative are othered as “anti-Polish.”²¹⁴ This is to say nothing for the historical realities of non-Catholic groups that once found themselves connected to Poland at differing degrees due to living within the lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth through to World War II, when Poland’s reality as a multiethnic and multi-religious state ended through genocide, population transfers, and shifting borders.²¹⁵ Polish identity through PiS’ lens ignores the strong influence of Jewish culture on Polish identity and cultural practices, the difficulties of heavily multilingual families in the border region of Galicia-Lodomeria at during the rise of both Polish and Ukrainian nationalism in the 19th century, and the historical multiethnic Polish-German communities of Pomerania, among other groups. These groups have been posthumously stripped of their connections to Poland and to their Polishness through their inability to be of the dominant religion, and thus are placed as outside the nation. This otherness has extended through PiS’ operationalization of messianism, the Bulwark of Christianity theory, and social conservatism to Poles who lack a sufficient connection to Catholic institutions or hold pro-European or socially liberal sentiments.

The ability to use historical narratives as a way to exclude and include people within the concept of an identity or nation is a fact of building an identity or nation, and its use in a Polish context has historically meant centring the Catholic Church as a significant part of the country’s connection to Europe and its position as a cultural protector of Polish traditions and self. However, this historical narrative, as much as it

²¹⁴ Skóra, “In Poland, the Catholic church backed abortion bans and authoritarian politics. Young people are turning away.”

²¹⁵ Zaremba, Marcin. “The ‘War Syndrome’: World War II and Polish Society.” In *Seeking Peace in the Wake of War: Europe, 1943-1947*, edited by Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, Sandrine Kott, Peter Romijn, and Olivier Wieviorka, 28-29. Amsterdam University Press, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt18z4gn8.5>.

comes from a real need to process the trauma of the Partitions and form a new national identity for then-stateless Poles to rally around, proves problematic in a now sovereign and independent Poland. The country's membership in the European Union similarly problematizes this narrative of Poland as a messianic figure as differing concepts of what a "European identity" (and through this, Poland's identity as a European entity) struggle against conflicting notions and concepts of nationhood and the role of democratic institutions and religion within it.

PiS' use of historical narratives has been a notable concern for Poland's democratic institutions. With an overarching narrative that reform is needed to bring along a moral revolution and a "Fourth Republic" free from the influence of post-communists and European bureaucrats, PiS has become increasingly disillusioned with liberal democracy and its values, and has become more authoritarian and Eurosceptic as its government reaches its eighth year in power. This situation has significantly severed Poland's once lauded ties to the European Union as a member state, and has placed the country's role as a part of the union's economic core in jeopardy. The radicalization of PiS and the role historical narratives, rhetoric, and appeal to specific institutions play an important part in PiS' position towards the European Union, and its ability to walk a tightrope between strong Eurosceptic sentiments and remaining in the union.

However, PiS' currently trajectory of halting integration while remaining within the EU for its economic benefits may prove problematic for the party. The European Union has, since PiS' return to government in 2015, been more open in defying the party's consolidation of power through economic sanctions and legal action, although the success of these moves still remains unseen as of this writing. Notably, PiS' Eurosceptic views have blended into a broader belief that Polish culture must be protected from a

range of outside dangers, from post-communists to Russian influence to Western social liberalism. In turn, the party has developed a style of governing and identity-building based around loyalty to the party and its policies, with those against it framed as a “total opposition” that is deemed as “anti-Polish” or even stripped of their Polish identity entirely. PiS has taken messianism and Poland’s historical Catholic connections and operationalized these concepts to fit their image of Poland is, and its role within the European Union as a whole.

Poland is not alone in using historical narratives and national identity to reposition its institutions and its role within the European Union. As stated previously, PiS’ time in government has been mostly concurrent with the administration of Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and the two government have been allies in both policy making and moving against what they consider European interference in domestic affairs, such as LGBT+ and media rights. Similarly, PiS’ time in government has been during a period of numerous successes for right-wing nationalist and populist parties in Europe, and it seems that the European unions faces an increasing discomfort in further integration from member states, and a possible crisis of identity around its position within Europe in the 21st century.

PiS has operationalized a form of nationalism that, ultimately, breeds a sense of paranoia, a garrison mentality, and an unwillingness to view Polish identity and nationhood outside the realm of association with the Catholic Church and a view of Poland as a “Christ of Nations.” These concepts, bolstered by a historical narrative of Poland as a victim, a martyr, and an eventual saviour of traditional European values, has isolated what was once the EU’s “poster child” and placed it in an antagonistic position

against an European project of identity-building that emphasizes the rule of law, liberal democracy, and the value of protections towards minority voices.

Instead, PiS has formed the infrastructure for an illiberal democratic regime through the justification of maintaining control of Polish identity and the institutions that signify that identity, as well as the demonization of any outside forces to this narrative of traditional Polish values. Although the party faces elections in October 2023, and does run a significant risk of losing power to a liberal and left-leaning opposition more friendly to European integration and recontextualizing and redefining what Polishness is to better represent an increasingly secularizing country, PiS' time in government may prove that any effort to critique historical narratives that place Poland as an inherently Catholic entity, and defined *by* its Catholicism, within a framework of a Christian Europe may find notable pushback, especially from those fearful of what they see as *finis Poloniae* if this narrative is threatened.

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