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One nation, two national identities: the impact of politics and the media on the recent shift in identity construction in Poland

≈ Abstract

The recent shift towards conservative nationalism in Poland seems to be part of a greater whole, observed not only in several countries of Eastern Europe but also in some parts of the "old" Europe as well as in America. However, a closer look reveals disturbing differences between Poland and other countries in that Poland's contemporary political conservatism is becoming alarmingly close to the communist authoritarian rule, tinted with a large dose of populism and nationalism. Unlike elsewhere, the Polish identity transformation was triggered by a recent national tragedy, i.e. the death of the Polish President and ninety-five other prominent Poles in the Smolensk air crash of 2010. The tragedy, followed by intense political propaganda of the right-wing parties, has had a far-reaching consequence: it has divided Polish society. The rupture is so deep that Poland seems to be inhabited by two tribes, admittedly deriving from the same stem, yet, apart from the shared territory and language, having nothing or very little in common. The demarcation line goes across communities, groups of friends and even families, making communication between both sides almost impossible. The division has also affected the sphere of identity: once homogenous, firmly grounded in people's consciousness, the sense of national identity has been replaced by two different and opposing identities which, despite common roots, are highly antagonistic towards each other.

Aware of the complex character of the very idea of national identity as well as of the variety of approaches to the concept of identity, the authors try to scrutinize why so many Poles, laboriously trying to emulate the Western world after the 1989 political upheaval and re-establish their national identity so as to face challenges posed by the new millennium, have suddenly started questioning their own achievements. To explain the dual nature of national identity it is necessary to examine its foundational myths, as the re-surfacing opposing identities can be traced back to the same roots. The authors claim that the dichotomy of Polish national identity is its innate quality which had not manifested itself fully before the 2010 Smolensk trauma. The tragedy not only brought to the surface the duality but also started the parallel re-interpretation and re-construction of the paradigm of national identity. The authors argue that the process has accelerated since the latest election, when the winning party and its associated media initiated the policy of reshaping the crucial elements of national identity, thereby further polarizing Polish society.

≈ Resumen

El reciente giro hacia el nacionalismo conservador en Polonia parece formar parte de un fenómeno más amplio, que se puede observar no solo en algunos países del este de Eurpa sino también en partes de la "vieja" Europa e incluso en América. Sin embargo, una mirada más atenta revela diferencias preocupantes entre Polonia y el resto de países, en el sentido de que el actual conservadurismo político polaco se está acercando alarmantemente al régimen autoritario comunista, coloreado con una generosa dosis de populismo y nacionalismo. A diferencia de los demás contextos, la transformación de la identidad polaca se desató a raíz de una tragedia nacional reciente, esto es, la muerte del Presidente del país y otros noventa y cinco prominentes ciudadanos polacos en la tragedia aérea de Smolensk de 2010. La tragedia, a la que siguió una intensa actividad propagandística por parte de los partidos de derechas, tuvo una consecuencia de alcance insospechado: la división de la sociedad polaca. Esta ruptura es tan profunda que Polonia parece estar habitada por dos tribus que, si bien comparten un mismo origen, territorio y lengua, tienen muy poco o nada que ver. La línea de demarcación separa comunidades, amigos o incluso familias, haciendo que la comunicación entre ambos lados sea casi imposible. Esta división también ha afectado al ámbito de la identidad: otrora homogénea y firmemente enraizada en la conciencia de la población, la identidad nacional ha sido reemplazada por dos identidades diferentes y opuestas, a pesar de sus raíces comunes.

Conscientes de la compleja naturaleza de la misma idea de identidad nacional, así como de la multitud de aproximaciones teóricas al concepto de identidad, los autores tratan de examinar por qué tantos polacos, tras realizar enormes esfuerzos por emular a Occidente después de la revolución política de 1989 y reestablecer su identidad nacional con el fin de afrontar los retos del nuevo milenio, han comenzado de manera repentina a cuestionar sus propios logros. Para explicar la naturaleza dual de la identidad nacional es necesario examinar sus cimientos míticos, puesto que los dos sentimientos identitarios que están emergiendo tienen sus orígenes en las mismas raíces. Los autores postulan que la dicotomía de la identidad nacional polaca es en realidad una cualidad innata de la misma, si bien esta no se había manifestado de manera clara antes de los acontecimientos de 2010. La tragedia de Smolensk no solo hizo emerger esta dualidad sino que también fue el comienzo de una labor paralela de reinterpretación y reconstrucción del paradigma de identidad nacional. Los autores interpretan que este proceso se ha visto acelerado desde las últimas elecciones generales, cuando el partido ganador y los medios que lo apoyan comenzaron una campaña de reformulación de los elementos básicos de la identidad nacional, contribuyendo así a la creciente polarización de la sociedad polaca.

Palabras clave:
Identidad nacional, Dicotomía, Mito fundacional, Política, Medios de comunicación

More than a decade ago Steven Otfinoski, in his book *Poland: Nations in Transition*, remarked: "This country, which two hundred years ago virtually vanished from the map of Europe is today one of the strongest nations in Eastern Europe and [...] is getting ready to take place of leadership in a newly aligned Europe" (2004, 1). Indeed, Otfinoski's optimism seemed to be justified as the role of Poland in the European Union had been steadily growing since her accession to the European Union in 2005 to reach its peak in 2016 when the Polish politician, Donald Tusk, became the President of the European Council. However, let us fast-forward to the present and the perspective that the year 2019 affords is a different one, as it shows a dramatic change in the position of Poland in relation to other EU countries as well as in the attitudes of Poles towards the EU. Poland is rapidly losing her reputation of a democratic country and a loyal supporter of a united Europe. A significant number of enthusiastic, pro-European citizens have virtually engaged in undermining their recent achievements and have begun to question European values, revealing their nationalist, populist, racist and xenophobic face. The purpose of this study is to identify major reasons for such an unexpected and marked shift in attitudes within Polish society towards the EU, as well as gain new insights into the causes of the polarisation of the society. With this aim in sight, the concept of national identity and its formative stages will be a focal point of the discussion. Historical perspective, as well as recent developments will provide a sound basis for understanding the dichotomy of Polish national identity and, most importantly, the impact of the plebeian identity on the polarisation of the country.

A resurgence of interest in nationalistic and populist conservatism observed in many countries around the world is no novelty in recent years, and it may be attributed to a range of social and political processes impacting modern societies. As Steven Levitzky notices, populists and nationalists win their support by playing on negative emotions towards "the others", be it the elites, refugees, immigrants or minorities. Sometimes, like in the US, the division goes along the cultural and racial lines (2018, 22). However, the Polish case, full of paradoxes and inconsistencies, only partly mirrors the processes taking place in Europe and the world, and it is consequently much more complex and difficult to explain.

Numerous observers of the Polish political scene insist that the contemporary shift towards conservatism, alarmingly reminiscent of the communist authoritarian rule, and tinted with a large dose of populism and nationalism, was triggered by a recent national tragedy, namely the death of the Polish President and ninety-five other prominent Poles in the Smolensk air crash of 2010. The tragedy, followed by intense political propaganda on the part of the right-wing parties, not only divided Polish society but also had serious, far-reaching consequences for the conspicuous Polish national identity crisis. Once homogenous, firmly grounded in people's consciousness, it has been recently replaced by two distinctly different identities. However, a closer examination reveals that Polish national identity bears a congenital defect and its present duality is not merely a matter of the recent past. What fundamentally distinguishes Poland's extraordinarily rapid turnabout in political and social views from similar tendencies in Europe and even further afield is, apart from the exceptionally strong position and role of the Catholic Church, the

peasant mentality of a significant part of the Polish society. However neglected in cultural and sociological debates, this mentality developed over a long period of time and its distinctive features became a substantial part of the country's national identity, which has survived in its primordial form up to the present time due to the turbulent Polish history. In more precise terms, Polish national identity, together with its vital constituent, i.e. the aforementioned peasant mentality, became fossilized as Polish society followed a different path of evolution as compared to that of the Western societies.

Most sociologists agree that "...pre-modern population identified itself in religious, regional, or social terms..." (Wangler 2012, 47). In other words, in the nineteenth century, when people became increasingly aware of belonging to a given nationality, the basic criteria for recognizing their nationality were the territory they lived in, limited by the state's borders, the language they used and their common history and religion. However, the primordial homogeneity of nationhood came under threat in the second half of the twentieth century due to progressive globalization, mass migrations as well as growing individual or group self-awareness, and a variety of cultural, ethnic, sexual or ecological differences. As Wangler notes, "[a]ttachments generated by kinship, religion, language or location are not static and do not remain unchanged when transmitted from one generation to the next" (2012, 43). Consequently, in today's globalized world characterized by mass migration, "...identity formation involves construction and reconstruction throughout 'the life-course of individuals and groups and through their different faces, roles and circumstances'" (Melucci, quoted in Kennedy 2001, 2). It is only natural then that individuals' and/or group's identities coexist with one another.

Considering general trends in identity formation processes across the world, Polish society seems to be affected by them to a lesser extent, which may stem from several reasons. As opposed to modern, multicultural societies, Polish society is considerably uniform in racial, ethnic, linguistic and cultural terms. Also, due to Poland's convoluted history, the processes of identity formation have not been continuous and uniform and, more importantly, they have not permeated all layers of society. Finally, of no lesser importance for the formation of Polish national identity was its primordial duality and rigid social stratification. It is generally assumed that at a formative stage of identity formation (the nineteenth century), clearly defined cornerstones of national identity were created by the relatively small but influential, enlightened intelligentsia. A vast majority of Polish society, i.e. peasants, for a variety of reasons discussed further in this paper, forged their own identity, whose basic foundations were coincidentally similar to the identity developed by intelligentsia, but which had different origins. In the twentieth century, peasants, confronted with an entirely new political reality, adopted the dominant intelligentsia's narrative as it was not different from their own. Yet, their own, distinctive identity has never disappeared; on the contrary, it has remained firmly anchored in their mentality. Under favorable circumstances, the distinctiveness of this identity not only resurfaced in time, but ultimately consolidated and perpetuated its plebeian and peasant character.

The contemporary national divide correlates roughly with the present political preferences, and despite being to some extent dependent on age, place of living and level of education, it quite literally cuts families, local communities and the whole society into two antagonistic groups. Both groups seem to have very little in common, apart from occupying the same territory, speaking the same language and recognizing themselves as part of the same history and cultural tradition. Yet, they do not have a similar historical memory and they do not adhere to the same cultural codes. The two opposing groups within Polish society, the liberal ("the elite") and the conservative ("ordinary people"), as they are referred to, resemble two hostile tribes, unable to negotiate and build a consensus on issues that naturally call for cooperation, regardless of political or religious affiliations. Mutual distrust and resentment are so deep that, at the time of writing, not only discussion on contentious issues but also simple communication seems literally impossible in the near future. Needless to say, Polish nationalism and conservative populism, exceptionally aggressive and brutal, are particularly destructive for the state as well as citizens.

It would be a hasty conclusion to assume that the present polarization of society, so deep and radical, is solely a consequence of the recent past. On the contrary, the formation of basic features of national identity is inextricably linked to the history of Poland. The process of polarization began long ago as a consequence of definite and favorable circumstances, which eventually led to the formation of two distinct national identities within one nation. It is worth noting that this duality reflects historical class divisions as well as traumas. However, while one of the identities had always been dominant, the other had remained suppressed until 2010, when the Smolensk catastrophe acted as a catalyst for the outburst of pent-up emotions. The governing Right was the first to recognize the nature of the emotional divide within Polish society as an identity dichotomy and has efficiently unblocked the hitherto suppressed identity after winning the 2015 election.

It should be stressed that both identities had never before been so clearly articulated and confronted with each other. On the contrary, after 1989's political transformation, both the pro-European elites as well as most Poles engaged in the changes wrongly assuming that all Polish citizens greeted the end of the communist rule with open arms. It was gladly glossed over that there existed a huge group of those for whom the transformation was not necessarily a blessing but a challenge for which they were not prepared. Literally overnight, Polish people had to give up the safety of an overprotective socialist welfare state and face the competitiveness of the capitalist system. They also had to take responsibility not only for their own lives but also for the future of their own country as the newly implanted democracy was more demanding than the old system, which excluded ordinary citizens from participation in politics. There were numerous signs suggesting a widening crack in the society, but these either passed unnoticed or were ignored by the elites. The startling revelation came to light not long afterwards. Nobody expected that the anger and disappointment of that group had not been merely economic-based frustration but actually stemmed from identity otherness. This other(ed), suppressed and imperceptible identity surfaced unexpectedly, initially ignited by the traumatic Smolensk air crash, followed by a propitious political situation which allowed for its clear articulation and manifestation. Eventually, skillful and efficient propaganda shaped and reaffirmed this latent identity. Paul Kennedy usefully defines the fundamentals of national identity as a "...'foundational myth' of national origin [which is] crucial in bringing modern nationhood to life..." (2001, 3). In the case of today's Poland, nothing could serve better for reviving the foundational myth of the national identity than the symbolically tragic death of the Polish President flying to pay homage to Polish martyrs murdered by the Soviets in Katyń.

Despite significant differences between the two national identities which have been coexisting in Poland for a long time, it is important to note that both derive from one stem and were built on the same pillars of collective memory. Among several foundational myths three seem to be most significant: traumatic history, patriotism and religion. Following from this, the key words describing the Polish national identity are *suffering*, past and God (Kurz 2018, 89). The history of Poland had been marked with dramatic historical events eventually leading to the Partitions[1] which erased the country from the map of Europe in the nineteenth century. For the following two hundred years (1795–1989), Poles experienced a series of disasters, including a hundred-year threat of total extinction under the Austrian and (this being particularly brutal) German and Russian rule of the annexed territories, with a series of failed uprisings followed by bloody repressions. A short period of independence after WWI was disrupted by the German and Soviet[2] invasions, which once again deprived Poles of their independence. WWII, itself a dreadful experience, additionally traumatized Poles with such events as the Katyń Massacre[3], the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising[4] and Warsaw Uprising[5], as well as the tragic fate of the Home Army. Finally, betrayed by America and Britain at the Yalta Conference, Poland began a long period of dependence on the Soviet Union, punctuated with sanguinary rebellions against communist rule. All such traumatic events had a great impact on Polish identity as historical memory came to be entwined with pain and suffering, consequently reinforcing a strong tendency within Polish society to define other people, be it Poles or different nationalities, in terms of friends and enemies.

The prolonged fight for independence resulted in the formation of a very specific patriotism which assumed that love of the Motherland requires the highest sacrifice – life. Thus, martyrdom became another fundamental element of Polish national identity. Several historic turning points, in particular the Partitions, the Nazi-Soviet Pact or the Yalta Agreement, are also responsible for reinforcing mistrust of others, a constant fear of betrayal and an enduring sense of isolation. At the same time Poles seek compensation for the bitter feelings by holding on to the firm conviction that their bravery and sacrifice will one day be appreciated by others. In other words, readiness to die in the name of the Motherland exemplifies the Poles' belief in their moral supremacy over other nations.

This conviction of moral supremacy, in turn, resulted in the emergence of Polish Romantic messianism. The latter derives from the third salient characteristics of Polish national identity: its symbiosis with Catholicism. The close alliance between Polishness and Catholicism was confirmed and consolidated during the Partitions when the Roman Catholic Church came to stand as a symbol of the nation's unity and survival. The Church, apart from the private sphere of one's family, was the only place where Poles were beyond the control of the invaders' institutions and their oppressive methods aiming at total de-Polonization. Adopting a broader perspective, as Deborah Schneider notes, language was another manifestation of resistance during the Partitions (2006, 33). The Church was one of very few places in which the Polish language was used and where Polish nationalism was fuelled, which goes a long way towards accounting for the ties between language, religion and nationalism.

Yet, it is not only the backbone of Polish national identity that was born in the Partition period and subsequently shaped by a series of adverse historical events. Importantly, it was also then that today's identity dichotomy was initiated. When the concept of nation was evolving in the majority of European countries in the nineteenth century, Poland, partitioned between Austria, Germany and Russia, did not exist as an independent state. In view of that, Anderson's classical definition of a nation, as an "... imagined political community [which is] both inherently limited and sovereign" (2006, 6) cannot be mechanically applied to the Poland of the Partitions: it was neither "inherently limited" nor "sovereign". At that time Poles lived in three different countries having not only different languages but also diverse cultural and political traditions. As a result, common Poles in each of the partitions tended to exclude from their "imagined community" those who lived in the other two partitions, especially in light of the fact that "...there was no one alive, who could remember the time when Poland had been an independent state" (Davies 2001, 9). Sovereignty, too, was beyond the reach as Poland did not exist as a separate state. Nonetheless, owing to the efforts of numerous Poles maintaining traditions and sustaining hope for freedom, as well as the role that the Catholic Church played in this process, it was possible to build an "imagined community" and work out the idea of a nation with its own identity. Those numerous Poles, "founding fathers" of the country's national identity, treated the preservation of Polishness as their patriotic duty and therefore they passed on its nearly intact model from generation to generation. However, they did not represent all layers of Polish society; on the contrary, they belonged to the relatively small, although domineering, enlightened classes, consisting of the impoverished gentry, intelligentsia and burghers (town middle classes). In other words, they constituted the intellectual elite of a non-existing Poland who felt obliged to defend the memory of its cultural distinctiveness and moral integrity at all costs. As Davies emphasizes, "[u]nlike other social classes in nineteenth-century Poland, the intelligentsia has to be defined by the function which its members perceived for themselves – to guard, treasure, and expand Polish culture" (2001, 234).

In the crucial period that was the nineteenth century, the majority of Poles living in any of the three occupied parts were peasants (Encyklopedia PWN 2017). On the whole, it was a poor or very poor class, mostly uneducated, whose efforts focused mainly on physical survival and which was entirely dependent on their feudal lords (Davies 2001, 223–4). Although the first attempts to integrate peasants into the nation were made at the end of the eighteenth century (The Constitution of 3 May 1791), "...it took seventy years [since 1794] until the last serfs were freed of their feudal dues in Poland, and probably another couple of generations before the last Polish-speaking peasant realized that they, too, were Poles" (Davies 2001, 220). The process was long and only partly successful as for too long generations of Polish peasants experienced merciless exploitation and humiliation by their owners. It is not surprising then that this group should have devised a "survival" system based on relying on themselves, their family and their local community, all being friendly, supportive and providing safety to one another. The system of mutual support was first of all family-oriented, which is typical of peasant communities. As Schneider observes, "[f]amily networks are […] of major importance for the survival for non-elite families, at an even greater degree than for elite families" (Schneider 2006, 97). Everyone who was behind the demarcation line of the community was perceived as a potential enemy, posing a threat to the group. As a consequence, outsiders were defined as "they" whereas anyone accepted by a peasant community was included into the inner circle of "us". Ultimately, the whole class of peasants built their identity on locality, and not on a more inclusive (but what for them would have been quite an abstract) concept of nation. Besides, the

figures of power representing the state, such as state officers, teachers or policemen, deepened the alienation from and distrust in a national community as these were associated with oppression and danger (Kajdanek 2012, 163). The consequences of their complete dependence on feudal lords, or, a century later under communism, on the state-owned collective farms, shaped a very specifically dual peasant mentality and identity. On the one hand, peasants exhibited fear and an inferiority complex with respect to authority, as well as a condescending attitude towards those below in social hierarchy, e.g. Jews. On the other hand, they showed passivity in the face of the power of authority. Helplessness intensified anger and hatred expressed in an oblique way: by passive resistance and satisfaction derived from the opponent's failure (163). Joanna Podgórska adds that the conviction of a large group of Poles that they deserve better treatment, salary, recognition (in other words, compensation for all their past misfortunes) is an unhealed trauma still present in their personality (Podgórska 2018, 27). Unable to better their lives, oppressed, humiliated and exploited, they sought solace and compensation in religion, hoping that their worldly hardship and suffering would be rewarded in heaven. The Church, always present in the lives of the Polish people, demanded subordination and obedience but, at the same time, promised eternal salvation and, even more importantly, a sense of belonging and protection from evil forces, real or imagined. Religion gave hope for miracles and its repetitive rituals provided the hard lives of many simple minds with a welcome sense of order. Last but not least, during the Partitions the Church became a substitute of the state as it embraced all dispersed communities, for whom churches were the only places in which Polish peasants could communicate in their own language.

Apart from the inconvenience caused by the necessity of using the language of the invaders in public institutions, the partition of Poland did not really mean much for the peasantry as it did not significantly worsen their situation. Their material conditions were miserable and "...the former Polish Commonwealth was still the land, as it has been for centuries, in which justice, freedom, political rights and independence were served mainly for 'the lords'. So they did not identify themselves with that land and did not consider it their own" (Molenda 1991, 129–30). It was that other part of society, generally speaking, which could be referred to as the intelligentsia, who paid a high price for its resistance. Despite many adversities, the intellectual elite was persistent enough and eventually successful in laying the foundations of Polish national identity.

When Poland regained independence after WWI, the country's social structure remained unchanged: "[t]hree-quarters of the population worked in agriculture and were mostly peasant farmers. Industrial workers in cities made up only 17 percent of the population. The remaining tiny percentage – professionals, entrepreneurs, and landowners – held all the wealth and power" (Otfinoski 2004, 18). This class continued to take responsibility for the country: within several years they managed not only to improve the economy and build industry from scratch, but also unite the nation, which was not easy because "[a] century of separation had made Poles in the three partitioned sections strangers to one another" (18). What is more, "...the understanding of their Polishness was so varied, so fragmented by competing loyalties and by conflicting social, economic, and political interests, that it provided no certain basis for [a uniform national consciousness]" (Davies 2001, 221).

However, the identity built by Polish elites did survive as it was founded on ideas understandable and acceptable for the lower classes: religion, patriotism and kinship, the latter pre-

cisely identifying those who were or were not Poles. Admittedly, the interpretation of patriotism (the "us vs. them" dichotomy), was not the same among the elites and non-elites. For the elites patriotism embraced the nation, while for the lower classes it still referred to locality. Whereas the elites saw "others" outside the borders of Poland, for the peasantry "others" might be those not belonging to their community, paradoxically even the elites themselves – rich and powerful. Nonetheless, the first step towards a relatively homogeneous national identity was made.

Unfortunately, pre-WWII Poland was not given enough time for completing economic, political, social and mental transformations. The short period of independence ended and Poland, attacked first by Germans and soon by Soviets, became divided again, with one part being occupied by the Nazis and the other falling under Soviet control. And Poles were treated mercilessly in either part: they lived in constant fear of being killed or sent to concentration camps in the German part or to gulags in most remote corners of the Soviet Union. The war took a heavy toll on human lives: "Poland's greatest loss, final and irrecoverable, was the loss of its six million dead – almost one in five of the pre-war population" (Davies 2001, 88).

The war terror helped all Poles, regardless of their class origin, clearly define their enemies as Russians, Germans and also Jews, accused of cooperation with Soviet communists. During the war another characteristic trait of Polish national identity, i.e., readiness for the highest sacrifice for the Motherland, was solidified by the Polish intelligentsia. This class was at the forefront of the resistance movement and therefore was particularly fiercely persecuted by Germans and Russians alike:

As a result, the Polish intelligentsia was decimated and its influence has never fully revived whereas "[t]he Polish peasantry survived the war largely intact..." (94).

> ...[T]he hand of death did not fall evenly on all sections of the population. It fell most heavily on those elements most difficult to replace. It fell most frequently on the youth – on the young men and women who fought and resisted; on the trained and educated classes, who were selected for elimination by the genocidal planners of the occupying powers, and on the brave and the active, who did not care to serve the tyrants in silence. (Davies 2001, 88)

The end of the war did not signify real independence. On the contrary, against the will of the Polish people, Poland remained in the area of Soviet influence, which in practice meant limited sovereignty under communist rule. However, the political situation was not the only sphere of great change. Social stratification also underwent a radical transformation after the war:

> The nation's population had dropped by nearly a third of what it was at the war's start. Hundreds of towns were to be repopulated by Poles previously exiled to Russia and elsewhere. The Polish intelligentsia and Jewish population had been nearly exterminated. Other minorities had been uprooted by the war. What was left was a vast majority of Roman Catholic Poles. (Otfinoski 2006, 27)

It should be emphasized that the only institution the survivors could trust and turn to after the war was, was again, the Polish Church, which "…survived, tempered by a martyrdom shared with the people and strengthened as the torch bearer of Polish identity" (Davies 2001, 94).

In time, communism brought about some further changes to the structure of social classes. The doctrine itself advocated a classless society, consisting of citizens equal in status and wealth. In practice, however, this utopia never came into being. On the one hand, the peasant class significantly diminished as a large number of people working and living in the country moved to the cities to become an industrial working class (the embryo of what, in the next generation, would become the middle class). On the other hand, the old elites were replaced by the Communist Party leaders and activists – a new "upper" class having political as well as economic power over the rest of Polish society. As Davies explains, "[o]ne of the principal products of a generation of Communism was [the] division between the 'power' (władza) and 'society' (społeczeństwo), between the bosses and the people, between 'them' and 'us'"(39).

The new members of the working and middle classes brought with them their plebeian customs, beliefs, fears and prejudices. They never abandoned the well-established paradigm of identity, with its strong rejection of the members of the "elite" (the "other"), associated as they were with oppression and constant threat. They sought safety and acceptance in family and close friends, rather than fellow countrymen. Religion, with its traditional moral codes, confirmed their sense of continuity and belonging, on top of arousing a rewarding feeling of being part of a greater resistance movement against the communist regime.

The intellectual elites, although decimated and persecuted, were still an important opinion-forming group, especially because they were supported by the Church. Whereas the change of the system was not possible, it was possible to compete with communists in the sphere of values and ideology. The intellectual elite, communists and the Church tried to rebuild Polish national identity for their own purposes. The first group was too weak as it was dispersed all over Poland. As a consequence, their influence was important but relatively limited. Communists, for their part, could not be successful in their endeavors because the majority perceived the system they represented as imposed by force. Thus, the only institution which linked the past with the present and symbolized traditional Polishness was the Church. The Church authorities, afraid of the secularization of the country under communist rule, concentrated on the peasantry and working classes living in small towns and villages. As a result, they managed to bond firmly Polishness together with Catholicism and eventually incorporate both as inherent features of national identity.

The political transformation of 1989 and all the subsequent political, social and economic changes, particularly accession to the EU, were perceived as highly successful from the perspective of outside observers. Within Polish society, however, support for the changes was not quite unanimous. As Deborah Schneider observes,

Workers, peasants, national and local politicians, and intellectuals discovered that they had very different expectations about how the dismantling of communism and the putting in place of market and democratic institutions should proceed. This has resulted in conflict and disappointments on most sides, and affluence and hope for a very few. (2006, 24)

In more precise terms, the changes garnered great acclaim from some sectors of society, i.e. the post-transformation elite, consisting of well-educated people, living mainly in large cities, usually born into the old "intelligentsia" families, knowing languages, travelling widely and having contacts with other cultures. The non-elite members of society, for their part, with rather low cultural and economic capital, felt deceived and abandoned by the elite. While their economic condition did not tangibly improve yet, they had to face the new threats and challenges of the capitalist world: multi-dimensional changes, including globalization, technological progress, changes affecting family, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, as well as the latest threats posed by terrorism.

The initial, mostly economic disappointment was soon heightened by the fear of the unknown world and everyday life challenges not experienced before. Overlooked by the elite, seemingly suppressed, the fear and frustration were growing constantly, unnoticeably consolidating and hardening into the old, fossilized model of identity. As Schneider puts it, "…power conflicts between existing and newly emerging classes are often framed in terms of tradition versus modernity" (Schneider 2006, 82). Tradition was an asylum, a safe and friendly place with well-known and predictable rules. The outside world meant effort – intellectual and economic, change of work and place of living, competition and necessity to acquire new skills. For many the cultural upheaval, both too frustrating and demanding, meant the challenge of re-thinking the old culture manifested in everyday life and ultimately adjusting it to the changing reality. The adjustment required more time than people had. The 1989 transformation was not a smooth process for the Catholic Church either: the clergy, not ready to stay abreast of all the democratic changes, later accelerated by the country's accession to the EU, in many cases decided to sustain influence upon a large part of the Catholic society by fueling the anxiety about growing secularization.

As a result, all who did not have problems with catching up with the changing reality, and those who did not understand or care about the anxieties and exasperation shared by a large group of Poles, became in the eyes of the latter, "them", the elite, and eventually the enemies. Ordinary people found solace in the safe world of the old self: clearly defined enemies, against whom tradition and religion could be the best weapon. The right-wing politicians cleverly recognized the nature of trepidation and carefully prepared the ground for taking over power and making a political career out of exploiting people's frustration. Additionally, the Church, confronted with more progressive Western Christian thought, was not well prepared for liberalization. Instead of a discussion on the moral challenges of the new millennium it chose an alliance with the orthodox conservative Right, whose joint and consolidated propaganda appealed to emotions dwelling upon old fears and traumas implanted in collective memory. Yet it was the elites' model of national identity which dominated whereas the other, non-elite one, although already well-formed, did not manifest itself fully.

There seem to be two probable reasons as to why the non-elite part of society was either reluctant to reveal their identity or at least modify the existing one. One of them may derive from the deep inferiority complex about the upper classes. The second may be caused by the fear of being ridiculed and/or humiliated. Peasantry as a class was not highly respected in the past and has always carried negative connotations in Poland. The stereotype of a country bumpkin still persists and it is a synonym of back-

wardness, falling behind the changing reality and inability to keep up with the latest fashions. Such negative images and stereotypes only mirror and prove the long-term division of Polish society into the elites and the rest, i.e., the common people (Kajdanek 2012, 140). It is worth noting that during the communist regime the inferiority complex as well as the fear of being ridiculed or humiliated also started being articulated with reference to the West. On the one hand, the inter-war period made Poles believe in "...Poland's fundamental cultural ties with the West..." (Davies 2001, 134); on the other, the inefficient, centralized communist management system did not allow for a modern transformation of the economy and industry. Therefore, Poles used to perceive everything, from culture, lifestyles to goods produced by Western countries, as better, of higher quality and technologically more advanced than what they had access to at home. Admiration for the West, however, was mixed up with envy and embarrassment at domestic shabbiness and underdevelopment. This is probably why it was so easy for the Right to inflame the anger towards the West, camouflaged by this inferiority complex, and most recently turn it against the elites of the European Union.

As mentioned above, the frustration of the non-elites was under control as long as the elites were able to impose their vision of Polishness on the rest of society. A turning point came with the most dramatic event in recent Polish history, namely the air crash at Smolensk, which claimed the lives of ninety-six prominent Poles together with the President of the country. Shock and emotional trauma released an outburst of frustration and negative emotions, intensified by the fact that many people found it hard to believe that the tragedy was caused by a mere series of unfortunate mistakes rather than a carefully-planned plot.

Right-wing politicians were the first to recognize the nature of the growing frustration of a great part of society and skillfully used it to build a strong support for themselves. At first, they appealed to Polish Russophobia and revived the resentment towards Russians by suggesting that Russia's President Putin masterminded the Smolensk air crash. Then they extended hostile feelings to the political elite, insinuating that the Polish Prime Minister and his party might have cooperated with the Russians in the secret planning to kill the Polish President. At home "we" was understood as "ordinary" people while "they" was equated with the "elite". However, depending on the need, "they" could be post-communists, feminists, homosexuals, the Opposition and its supporters, the judiciary or simply those whose opinion on various matters was different from what "ordinary" people thought or wanted. Domestic enemies aside, propaganda also revived the outer ones: apart from Russians, these included the Germans, Ukrainians, Jews as well as refugees, immigrants and the European Union leaders. Whereas at home the elite were portrayed as selfish and greedy individuals who, irritated by the loss of power and privileges, were eager to betray Poland and make her dependent on the EU, refugees were shown either as terrorists, ready to kill innocent citizens, or as a threat to Poland's religion, tradition and way of life. The leader of the Right even suggested that they might be carriers of viruses and bacteria which could be potentially dangerous for the Polish population.

The traumatic memories of the time when Poland's existence was endangered were extensively exploited, and at the same time Polish nationalism was discreetly supported and protected. The West was referred to as an invader or tyrant who tends to exploit Poland and Polish resources mercilessly, and infect decent Poles with Western immorality and corruption.

The motif of an endangered family was conspicuously and instrumentally articulated in the discourse in which both politicians and the Church were engaged. Paul Kennedy, as well as some other scholars (Castells 1996, 1997; Woodward 1997) point to potential dangers of deliberate playing upon national identities for political purposes at the time of major, multi-faceted upheavals like "...marketization, migration, communications, time-space compression and the 'cultural supermarket' effect... " (Kennedy 2001, 14) As a result of these changes, as Kennedy observes, "...identity becomes our 'only source of meaning'" (14), which involves a range of negative consequences:

> The most obvious is that many people may be tempted to cluster around the primary identities and meanings derived from religion, ethnicity and nationality. This, in turn, may lead to extreme forms of identity politics. Indeed, wherever globalizing forces lead people to seek 'protective strategies' involving the attempt to 'salvage centered, bounded identities for placeless times' we are likely to find the revival of 'patriotism and jingoism'. (Robins, quoted in O'Byrne 2001, 140)

Needless to say, the fear of the above-mentioned changes might have prevented Poles from lessening their bonds with religion and patriotism. The idea of a 'Catholic Pole' (Polak-Katolik)[6] got strengthened in this way and became a shield against the (imagined) corruption of the Western world.

The Right also made use of something bashfully passed over in political commentaries, namely the plebeian descent of the large part of Polish society and the identity, scarred with numerous complexes, founded on this descent. One of them is the need for appreciation and compensation for real and imagined humiliation and suffering. Bearing this in mind, politicians started referring to "ordinary" people as the "sovereign". Jerzy Wilk remarks that the policy of lending dignity to the supporters from villages and small towns as well as the promotion of conservative views is highly appreciated by the right-wing electorate. The reason for it is that the conservative narrative is close to that of the Catholic Church's, in which Poles are the last defenders of Catholicism in Europe and therefore their duty is to preserve traditional faith and religiousness (Wilk 2018, 44). As a result, this narrative (whose addressees are "ordinary" people) is full of populist declarations about Poland's growing importance in the world and promises of further fight for the recognition of Poland's past merits. The views of the Catholic Church are similar: the uniqueness of Poland lies in its devout Christianity, which sooner or later will become a model for the rest of Europe.

The majority of the Polish clergy more or less actively sympathizes with the Right as the Polish Church is very conservative and not ready for the limitation of its privileges. On the contrary, since communism, when it gained its reputation as the only bastion of resistance and defender of freedom, it has systematically expanded its area of influence. Especially the non-elite classes have been prone to religious propaganda which portrays the West as demoralized and dangerous as it may destroy the traditional morality represented by Poles. The clergy eagerly refresh this trait of identity, which is directly linked to the Romantic idea of Polish messianism: Poles with their zealous faith would finally restore "true" religiousness in Europe, which would be eventually

appreciated by Europeans. Since the 1990s the influence of the Catholic clergy has grown steadily: under the Church's pressure religion was introduced in schools, abortion law was drastically tightened and, more recently, IVF schemes have been practically abandoned. The clergy are also openly against further emancipation of women and they openly propagate the patriarchal model of family. Consequently, anyone who does not share these attitudes is defined as an enemy of both religion and state who should be punished, or at least publicly condemned for their opinions.

Ewa Wilk notices that Poland's transformation revealed an enormous amount of surprising factual knowledge about Polish society. One of the unpleasant findings is the "...susceptibility to propaganda revealed in a large part of society, who gladly tolerates persuasion techniques used in spreading biased and frequently false ideas and opinions" (2018b, 62)[7]. The ruling party in Poland openly makes use of various propaganda methods and techniques and, what is more, uses the state institutions, such as television or radio, to propagate the desired ideas (61–2). Employing the media, politicians and the Church have managed to introduce a highly emotional and brutal vocabulary into the debate (2018a, 38–9). Language is not neutral any longer as it evidently reflects the political preferences of its user: for example, when one side talks about foetus, abortion or victims of the Smolensk air crash, the other talks about the unborn, killing of the unborn and the murdered in the Smolensk catastrophe.

The most alarming among the numerous manipulative methods are the Orwellian treatment of history and the unprecedented reform of education. The former is well exemplified by efforts to, for example, erase Lech Walesa from Poland's recent history and to have him replaced with other heroes, whereas the latter introduces a highly ideologized reading list to schools and places emphasis on the patriotic and religious education of the youth at the expense of general knowledge.

Numerous sociologists, historians and intellectuals, both in Poland and abroad, have been trying to understand the reasons for this dramatic and, in the longer run, potentially dangerous and destructive shift in Polish attitudes. Some of them point to the cultural transformation which turned out to be too radical for the Polish society, already frustrated with a fast and thorough political and economic change (Ekiert 2018, 28–9). Others blame irritation with prolonging economic inequality, not only between Poland and the West but also within Polish society itself (Roth 2018, 14).

Finally, some find fault with the long rule of communism, which impeded natural political and social processes and, as a result, did not adequately prepare Poles for democracy. Undoubtedly, the present convoluted state of affairs is a result of many political, social and cultural processes. Nevertheless, it might be argued that it is the past and the primordial peasant nature of Polish national identity that has decisively impacted the recent course of events.

The revival of this plebeian identity was made possible due to a favorable series of events in the country's recent history. Its manifestation and present social dominance were triggered by the current political twists and fueled by the political Right, cooperating with the Church. However, the question is what went wrong and when, and why Poles in free and prosperous Poland still identify themselves with past traumas and failures.

Difficult as it is to give one satisfying answer, three hypotheses should be considered. Firstly, the liberal part of society, enthusiastic about the country's transformation, assumed that the rest of society wanted this transformation as badly as they did. They wrongly took it for granted that economic and political changes and improved life standards would automatically unify society and, as a consequence, change mentalities, which apparently would also allow for accentuating the positive myths Polish identity was based on. It seems, however, that identity reconstruction or redefinition has to be voluntary, otherwise it will be perceived as imposed, and finally rejected as alien. Secondly, the elitist part of society was not aware that reconstruction, or even building a new identity around such values as democracy, equality, solidarity with others and tolerance, is a long and laborious process; that destruction of old myths is risky and it has to be done slowly and carefully. Thirdly, it was forgotten that such a huge transformation of the country necessitates the establishment of a civic society, aware of its duties, open to discussion, engaged in its development and responsible for the future. Finally, the fact was ignored that the alliance between the Church and incumbent party allowed for consolidating those elements of national identity that could be used for manipulating the electorate.

Until now the plebeian ancestry of a large part of Polish society has been a taboo subject, glossed over in political discourse and examined cursorily, if at all, due to numerous mental complexes. Having said this, it seems that the time has come for Polish national identity to come under close scrutiny, not only for academic purposes but first and foremost to avoid further dramatic twists and turns in Polish history.

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≋ Notes

[1] 1772, 1793 and 1795.

[2] 1 September 1939 (German invasion), 17 September 1939 (Soviet invasion).

[3] The Katyń crime: (April and May 1940) a series of mass executions of Polish officers and civilians (mainly intelligentsia) by the Soviet secret police (NKVD), approved by J. Stalin. The estimated number of victims: c. 22,000.

[4] 19 April–c.15 May 1943.

[5] 1 August–2 October 1944.

[6] The phrase 'Polak-Katolik' does not easily translate into English. The hyphen links two masculine singular nouns, thereby differing from alternatives like 'polski katolik' (Polish Catholic), 'katolicki Polak' (Catholic Pole), or 'polskokatolicki' (Polish-Catholic, as an ad- verb-adjective hybrid). The noun-noun construction is relatively uncommon in Polish; [...] Polak-Katolik is a common expression, particularly in debates about the meaning and content of Polish national identity [...]. [I]t implies an inseparable bond between these two communities of belonging, most commonly posited as an ideal (be it utopian or dystopian) rather than as a description" (Porter-Szücs 2017, 2).

[7] All translations are our own unless otherwise noted.