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Polish nationalism in transformation

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Nationalism can be defined as a discursive legitimisation of political action through commitment to national interests or ideas based on the mega-narratives of national identity. Poland belongs to states with particularly strong narratives of national identity around which Polish nationalism emerges. The referential narrative framework of Polish national identity has traditionally included three mega-narratives.

The first narrative portrays Poland as a Catholic country and one of the fortresses of (Catholic)-Christianity in Europe. This narrative has been used to legitimise the strong power position, which the Polish Catholic church acquired in Polish politics and society after 1989. The Polish situation is hardly comparable to any other European state. The church was guaranteed significant financial privileges and a strong influence on legislation in all issues related to morality and sexuality such as abortion, the use of contraceptives and same-sex marriage. Besides, the narrative of the Catholic nation is used to legitimise a firm opposition to the liberal Western philosophy of life and legal practices with respect to gender parity and equality, abortion, sexuality and the rights of homosexuals. The claims of proponents of liberal practices in this regard are described as being at odds with 'Polish traditions and habits' and rejected. In addition, representatives of the church usually participate in most national commemorations and celebrations as constituents of the nation.

The second mega-narrative depicts Poland as a nation placing a particularly high importance on the values of freedom and solidarity both at the domestic and the international level. Referring to the historical oppression suffered by Poland from Germany and Russia, this narrative implies political action for defending freedom and solidarity.

The third mega-narrative is linked to the second and constructs Poland as a country threatened by powerful neighbours like Germany and Russia and exposed to the disloyalty of allied great powers. This narrative sees the moral superiority of Poland over its former oppressors. In this context, the Polish notion of significant Others includes both Germany and Russia, with Germany being both a threatening and an inspiring significant Other and Russia being only a threatening one.

The huge socioeconomic and sociocultural changes in the recent decade and the fact that Poland has been anchored in the most important institutions of the West, such as the European Union and NATO have led to a slight modification of these narratives and consequently of Polish nationalism.

As far as the narrative of the Catholic nation is concerned, after the parliamentary elections of 2007, and especially after the presidential campaign of 2010, in both cases the Catholic church openly supporting the candidates of the losing right-wing conservative PIS, the left-wing political parties such as SLD and, even more, the new liberal movement Ruch Polarcia Palikota called for a societal modernization and began to put into question the legitimacy of the political and societal

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position of the Catholic church. Whereas in the 1990's and sometimes until 2007, in political and societal discourse the terms 'Poland' and 'the church' often merged with each other, and the terms 'Pole' and 'Catholic' were difficult to decouple, in the 2011 parliamentary election campaign, even right-wing political parties such as PO generally have avoided strict commitments to "catholic" values and manifestations of close relations to the church principals.

As far as the second and third narrative is concerned, both have also undergone significant modifications. The excellent performance of the Polish economy and the relative decrease of the economic and financial importance of Germany for Poland in the last years as well as the vision promoted by Donald Tusks' government of Poland as one of the major European players have led to a discursive revaluation of Germany. The new perspective on Germany is more rational and interest-driven, even if the Polish discourse still fervently opposes any German attempts to "reinterpret or write" the Polish-German history seeing in Germany Poland's historical oppressor and stressing the genocidal character of the German occupation in Poland during the Second World War.

Also the narrative of a threatening Russia has recently been revaluated in the Polish discourse. Whereas as late as in August 2008 this narrative implied a strong condemnation by the then Polish president Lech Kaczyński of the Russian invasion in Georgia and his unprecedented declarations of solidarity with Georgia, both the Polish government led by Tusk and Kaczyński's successor president Komorowski have rather attempted to reduce the influence of history on the contemporary relations between the two countries and to adopt a more interest-based policy towards Russia. (even if the supply of energy resources from Russia remains a constant area of Polish concern). The right-wing opposition by PIS has tried to counteract this new policy claiming that Poland would become "a German-Russian condominium". However, the emphasis on the narrative of Poland threatened by Russia (especially after the death of president Kaczyński in an air crash in Russia) has not helped PIS to enlarge its voters basis beyond its traditional voters.

In sum, these processes might lead to a definition of the nation more in civic and less in cultural or religious terms and to a nationalism based more on self-confidence than on the sense of external threats.

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