

FATIGUE

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Introduction

In October 2016, the Polish Black Protest against a proposed abortion ban received international attention as thousands of women all over Poland wearing black took to the streets. While the scale of the protests has not necessarily been kept up, 2016 introduced a new generation of feminists that challenges not only the current reproductive laws in Poland but also contributed to the opposition to Poland's right-wing, national conservative governing party PiS.

Relying on an ideational approach of populism, this paper explores how Polish feminists reclaim 'the pure people' and their relationship with left political forces. It argues that the current political competition is not conducive to the emergence of a strong political Left which leaves major responsibility to advance feminist demands to an active civil society. This paper illustrates how left feminists increasingly reclaim national symbols (Graff, 2019) and to represent the 'ordinary people' by challenging right-wing populists' notion of this concept¹. At the current stage, it is difficult to speak of Left populist feminists in Poland as their main task seems to be the struggle to be included in the definition of 'the Polish people' while the construction of 'the corrupt elite' that constitutes the second component of populism as a thin ideology is not being fully addressed. Polish feminists reclaim 'the people', but as they fall short when it comes to constructing the 'corrupt elite', they should not be considered populist.

I will start with a presentation of the current power balance between civil and political society considering their ideological positions. Arguably, in view of a weak political Left, Polish civil society is left with the task to push the feminist agenda. I will then present the concept of populism as a thin ideology, before elaborating the definition of the 'corrupt elite' and the 'pure people' put forward by right-wing populists in Poland. This is useful to understand the response of the left in defining these concepts.

Using the debate on reproductive rights in Poland that erupted in 2016, I will focus on a new generation of feminists that emerged during the last four years. Quotes of activists are taken from interviews that I conducted with Polish Women's Rights activists in January 2018 that were involved in the so-called Black Protest and consequent protests and activism against the restriction of reproductive rights. Looking closer at the invocation of 'Europe' by feminists, we can observe how feminist activists engage in the redefinition of 'the elites' and 'the people' professed by right-wing populists.

Political Competition in Poland

The current political landscape in Poland is marked by the weakness of the political Left (Hanley/Vachudova, 2018). During the last election cycles the Left, comprising the post-Socialist Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) and new leftist parties, has been side-lined by the dominating competition between the national conservative Law and Justice party (PiS) and the liberal conservative Civic Platform (PO) (Szczerbiak, 2013). This dominating competition has been observed for more than a decade now (Rae, 2008), while the Left has seen the constant weakening of the post-Socialist SLD and the rise and decline of new left political parties that draw mostly on young urban voters (Junes, 2019). In the

¹ For the use of national symbols by the populist Right and symbolic thickening of populism see (Kotwas/Kubik, 2019)



current Sejm, no leftist politician holds a seat, following the trend of decline observable in previous elections. Moreover, as the Left is internally divided, the comparably high threshold in national elections of 8% for parties that run as alliances becomes a crucial factor (Jaskiernia, 2017) further strengthening the PiS-PO duopoly.

The most recent success of the leftist culturally liberal party Wiosna (“Spring”) in the European Parliamentary elections seems to be another attempt to force leftist policies into this duopoly that has only been aggravated by the decision of several opposition parties (among them the SLD and the Greens) to join a ‘European Coalition’ formed around PO. Wiosna ran an articulated feminist and pro-LGBTQ platform including several feminist activists involved in the Women’s Strike and the Black Protest running as candidates. This suggests that cooperation between leftist political parties and the Polish civil society can indeed be fertile. To capture the whole image, however, it has to be recognised that the 6% of votes that Wiosna gained in the EP elections were not meeting expectations raised by polls earlier this year (Chapman, 2019) and the Polish parliamentary elections this November might not quite bring the change the opposition is hoping for.

Polish Civil Society

While the political Left in Poland seems to be side-lined, feminists claims often find their expression in civil society activism. Whereas civil society in Central and Eastern Europe and Poland in general has been found to be weak (Howard, 2011, 2007; Rupnik, 2007), an increasing body of literature challenges this analysis (Ekiert/Kubik, 2017, 2014; Giza-Poleszczuk, 2017). The last years saw an increase in feminist activism with previously unseen mass protests mobilising women (Korolczuk, 2016). Their increasing mobilisation mirrors somewhat the development within the conservative right: in terms of women’s mobilisation it is not only the Left that mobilises but also conservative civil society groups that are well connected to the national conservative government and favoured by the restructuring of the state-NGO relationships (Dudkiewicz, 2017; Grzebalska/Petó, 2018).

It is the civil society that pushes feminist policies. While the relationship between conservative and right-wing civil society actors and political parties is marked by close cooperation (Kubik in Hanley/Vachudova, 2018), the patterns are more mixed when it comes to the Left. Radical feminists tend to cooperate only with leftist parties such as Razem (“Together”), the Greens or Wiosna that do not hold (yet) enough leverage to seriously influence national policies, while the relationship with liberal conservative politicians especially of the Civic platform is marked by distrust as feminist demands have not been addressed during their time in government from 2007 to 2015.

Populism and Gender

Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser argue for the strength of the ideational definition of populism (Mudde/Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018), defining populism as a thin ideology that can then be thickened with other ideologies. At the core of the thin ideology of populism is the antagonistic division between ‘the pure people’ and the ‘corrupt elite’ where politics should express the *volunté générale*, the general will, of the people (Mudde, 2004). This exaltation of the ‘will of the people’ is combined with the preference of substance over procedure in a democracy (Kubik, 2012).

Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser argue that in its thin form, populism does not hold a strong position on gender issues—both in theory and practice. They find that “gender issues feature explicitly relatively seldom in populist programmes and propaganda, irrespective of accompanying ideology and geographical region” and that there is no evidence of an explicitly gendered interpretation of the people and the elite (Mudde/Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015). I want to argue that this should not be left unchallenged in view of Polish right-wing populists. In Poland, as elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe, we can see part of the construction of the corrupt European elite with its progressive stances on gender as strong markers of the evil elites as threatening the nation. While gender is not inherent to the thin ideology of populism, it plays a strong role in the thickening of populism through nativism in Poland.

The Populist Right in Poland



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To understand the responses of feminists to the right-wing populists, I now want to give a short overview of the construction of the corrupt elite and the pure people by the Right.

Firstly, who constitutes the corrupt elites? The Right, politically centred around PiS, skilfully constructs the corrupt elite comprising several groups. The domestic opposition is discredited and delegitimised as alien elites and traitors of the Polish people (Kubik, 2012). The narrative of betrayal can be traced back to the Polish transition and the Round Table Talks, where allegedly the chance to rebuild the Polish state in a way that enables the expression of the will of the Polish people was wasted (Linch/Kubik, 2006). The alien trait of these elites is reinforced by their ties to the detached European elites in Brussels that forge a progressive image of Europe seen as a threat to Polish values. Feminist activists as well as other protest groups are portrayed as foreign elites through allegations that they are externally funded.

These allegations are targeted also at grass-root feminist activists, as one feminist activist² in Warsaw expresses:

“Because, come on, we are all paying for this- it is not like someone is sponsoring it. I know that the right-wing is thinking that we get sponsorship of the European Union, but it is not like that.” (AFW)

Gender takes a special role in the populist discourse in Poland, despite Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser’s argument mentioned before: according to the populist Right, the corrupted elites supported by alien actors foster gender roles inherently hostile to the Polish society and its traditional conservative family values. The formulation of national identity is of high importance when populism is thickened by right-wing ideology (Stanley, 2017) and the construction of the ‘pure people’. Gender is central in Polish national identity. In particular, the role of women as sacrificing mothers is strongly connected to the understanding of the nation, which is intertwined with the influence of the Roman Catholic Church and its own role in Polish national identity. Furthermore, gender is used to fence off the Polish nation from the EU and its liberal values as well as from the country’s state socialist past.

Women are constructed as the bearers of the nation. The image of the Virgin Mary as ‘Mother Pole’ (‘Matka Polka’) is used as a symbol of patriotism, encouraging passivity of women in the political sphere and stressing the role of women as mothers and inactive bearers of nationhood (Adamiak/ Sobkowiak, 2010; Graff, 2008). Not conforming to very traditional and conservative images of womanhood can prevent women from making political claims that are recognised as legitimate (Hryciuk, 2017).

Dominant gender norms in Poland are highly influenced by the strong standing of the Roman Catholic Church. In contrast to most post-state socialist states, Poland’s national identity is highly marked by its Catholic tradition and plays a major role in the thickening of right-wing populism (Kotwas/Kubik, 2019). is strongly intertwined with the perception of nationhood, with the Catholic Church having a significant influence “on Polish social consciousness” (Adamiak/Sobkowiak, 2010:14). The Catholic Church asserts strong opinions on reproduction and gender roles, that are highly influential on public discourse, respective laws and politics (Radkowska-Walkowicz, 2014). While the connections between Catholic civil society and the government have been arguably particularly strong since 2015, Catholic influence is by no means anything new in Polish politics (Krzeminski, 2017).

The strong role of Catholicism in Poland coupled with the emphasis on maternity are important to understand why the question of reproductive rights is so controversial. When it comes to the question of abortion laws, these conservative attitudes team up with nationalist prejudices where “[any] proposals that promote women’s rights are treated almost as if they would result in a loss of national identity” (Żuk, 2017). Abortion especially became an issue of symbolic value where the resulting political projects decide over the future of the Polish nation (Kramer, 2009).

The threat to Polish gender norms ties in with the dilemma of Second World feminism: Feminism is perceived on the one hand as a foreign ideology imported from the West, while at the same time being stigmatised as a communist legacy (Grabowska, 2012; Slavova, 2006; Wejbert-Wąsiewicz, 2011). State socialism is accused in the literature of discrediting gender equality by ‘paying lip service to it’ (Graff, 2007). In view of reproductive rights, abortion is directly associated with communism (Szczuka, 2004) as abortion was legal in times of state socialism. Therefore, anti-Communism and Catholicism reinforce each other when it comes to reproductive rights.

² The activists interviewed for this paper will be introduced in more detail below.



Gender norms are at the core of Polish nationhood, and the different manifestations of these- Catholicism, motherhood, anti-Communism and anti-EU feelings- are strongly intertwined.

The Populist Left in Poland

In view of the Right's strategies to thicken populism in Poland, we can now explore the responses offered by Polish feminists. I want to argue that their response is not populist as they reclaim to be *part* of the people rather than to represent the pure people as a whole versus the corrupt elites. As for now, coherent and effective strategies to frame the corrupt elite are absent on the Polish Left and in feminist discourse.

As the current Polish government, although culturally on the right, has pursued social redistribution that is not that different from social democratic government spending- admittedly with a nationalist conservative grain of salt, the construction of the 'corrupted elites' as we can see in other left Populist rhetoric such as in Spain's Podemos are impeded. The opponents of feminists in Poland are found in the national conservative government and their partners in the Catholic Church, but also within the feminist movement where there are discrepancies between radical and liberal feminists (Graff, 2019).

Having said this, I would like to concentrate on the question of the redefinition of 'the people' by Polish feminists. More specifically, I want to concentrate on a new generation of Women's Rights activists that I encountered during my field work in 2018. Alongside participant observations in protests in Lodz and Warsaw, I was speaking to activists in both cities. Some of them had been involved in Women's Rights and LGBTQ activism before 2016, but they all highlighted that the Black Protest and its aftermath introduced a new generation of activists.

The feminist protests since 2016 are not only relevant in terms of this new generation but also in view to feminists' take on national symbols and national identity. Before 2016, Agnieszka Graff argues that we can neatly distinguish between liberal and radical feminists' approach to patriotism and national identity. "If the language of patriotism is the one in which claims to legitimacy are most effectively made in Poland, then liberal feminists are willing to use this language. This strategy is not, however, understood by them as a compromise with the nationalist right" (Graff, 2019: 486), whereas radical feminists (that are associated with leftist policies) reject patriotism and only used national symbols in an ironic way.

The blurred distinction between the liberal and radical feminists' use of national symbols can also be reaffirmed in the conversation with new activists, who situate themselves as leftists, but seek to be recognised as legitimate participants in the patriotic tradition alongside with liberal feminists.

As one member of Gals for Gals (Dziewuchy Dziewuchom) recalls:

"We also took part in some kind of debate about Polish culture, which took place in November last year in Teatr Powszechny. It was a pretty huge event about the future of Polish culture, about where it should go. Because, now, we have the feeling that Polish culture is going into [a] more national side and becomes very strict and very closed and very one-dimensional, I would say."

"I think it's becoming very concentrated on nationalism and national values and there is no space for being different anymore. So, the theatre and partners organised this kind of forum to talk about it. They also invited the minister of culture, but he didn't come of course." (ADW)

Polish feminists reclaim to be a valuable part of the 'people' and stress their rights as citizens to be part of the Polish nation.

"We took part in the equality parade in June- I think that was the biggest parade in Warsaw ever. It's a gay parade, but last year it was more a parade of the excluded. Because all the societies that feel excluded from the government's policies just gathered and decided that it would be nice to do something together, to show them that we also have the right to this place and to have rights" (ADW)

A New Generation of Feminists



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One of the core pushes to pursue these claims to be a legitimate part of the people lies in embracing ‘feminism’ in the first place.³ This is reflected in young activists identifying themselves as feminists and challenging the image of feminists as ‘non-feminine, unshaved men-haters’. The Black Protest and its consecutive activism lead to a shift in the perception of feminism.

“I would say that first of all ‘feminism’ is not such a bad word as it was before that. [...] So, I think that people are more aware. They think more about it. More people are reading, are trying to get the knowledge and a lot of young women right now, they feel more and more engaged with the feminist movement.” (AFW)

“My feeling is that [through the Black Protest] feminism became closer to everybody, close to women.” (ADL)

Based on their own experience, the young activists make feminism and feminist demands more approachable by addressing women more directly. The group *Dziewuchy Dziewuchom* in Lodz put emphasis in their events to address ordinary women, to get feminism out of its academic ivory tower and to address women in a relatable and approachable way. Stressing the notion of activists being “common” and “ordinary women” highlights their pushes to recognise feminists as part of the ordinary Polish people.

In the case of *Dziewuchy* this is nicely reflected in the name of the group:

“Because the word ‘dziewucha’ is like a common girl, just a gal, it’s funny. You can have a beer or coffee with her. She’s not that strict feminist, which is seen badly in Poland, especially by the majority of people who are not really into the theme of feminism.” (CDL)

“We talk about everyday women. Not a person who is academically educated on feminism and etc etc, but a common person, who probably just finished high school and went to work and gave birth to children, you know, and who never got into the idea of feminism, what it is really about.” (CDL)

This is also taken up in the group’s strategy:

*“And then I have a feeling that, when you speak about a very important issue, if language which is unappealing to people, that you may feel good with it, but people won’t accept the message. And *Dziewuchy* changed that, because they are somehow speaking, using the simpler language.” (BDL)*

Remembering a discussion event organised by the *Dziewuchy* group in Lodz, one member emphasises the commonness of these feminist activists.

“It was also like speaking from like the position of a common woman, like every woman.” (ADL)

They claim that by representing ordinary women to represent the whole nation. Support for this is found in the scale of the mass protest against the abortion ban in 2016.

“And also, like the massiveness of this protest showed: it’s everybody, it is like your neighbour, it’s your mother, your friend [...]” (ADL)

Responding to Right-wing Populists

Another interesting aspect is how these feminists relate to ‘Europe’ that is portrayed as the corrupt elite by the right-wing populists. The European Union is not seen as the level where reproductive policies can be changed. The national sovereignty in reproductive legislation is not questioned by this new generation of feminists in Poland. In the interviews, activists did not express demands to push for reproductive rights to become part of EU legislation. There is no direct attempt to question the national authority in ‘questions of moral significance’.⁴

³ These do not go unchallenged as the online campaign “Nie jestem feministką” (I am not a feminist) in 2018 highlights (Płatek, 2018).

⁴ Despite the EU’s commitment to strengthen Human Rights within its member states, reproductive rights have been excluded from the European agenda (Nowicka, 2011) and EU accession did not improve the situation of women in regard to their reproductive rights (Graff, 2003). Moreover, within the structure of the EU, it was the Polish government together with Malta



“The thing is that we really need some kind of support from the EU’s institutions. But [...] I don’t think there is any opportunity for the EU to control this situation, because it’s more- I think it is a matter of national parliament and so on. [...] So, I think they are just tied, they have their hands tied, they don’t have any solution for that.” (ADW)

However, Europe is used as a civilizational concept that has to be aspired and achieved, even if the responsibility to change reproductive policies lies within Poland. Europe is evoked as a standard of normality. This normality encompasses a woman’s free choice over her reproductivity and safe access to available technology, regardless of her socio-economic status. The reproductive legislation is demanded to ensure women’s free choice but also to provide access to healthcare. Poland is perceived to be capable of providing these standards, being a modern European country.

“And, I cannot imagine these kind of things [very restricted cases of legal abortions in Poland] happen in the 21th century in Europe- like almost in the centre of Europe. I just cannot believe it.” (ADW)

This standard of normality is framed as ‘European standards’ and used to legitimise calls for the liberalisation of the current abortion laws in Poland. These demands are perceived as radical by Polish standards but as legitimate by the activists:

“So, we have very strict abortion laws, very strict laws and not much support for women. But then everything which is trying to push it to more European standards seems radical.” (ADL)

Speaking on the demonstrations in Lodz and Warsaw, activists repeatedly emphasised that Poland was a European country and that the current abortion laws and a complete or partial abortion ban do not correspond to European standards. Feminist activists participate in demonstrations, such as events organised by the Committee for the Defence of Democracy (KOD) that bring together different civic activist groups and oppositional parties. Invoking ‘Europe’ acts a common denominator that is positioned against the national conservative policies of the current government.

Activists do not only refer to ‘Europe’ as a whole as a frame of comparison, but also use comparisons with other European countries. One activist invoked Germany, a country that itself is not among the most progressive countries in regard to Women’s Rights in Europe, to illustrate Poland’s need to ‘catch up’ with European standards:

“The problems that you have, for example like the coalition of gender-ideology, that’s a thing in Poland right now that the government is talking about: the dangers of the so-called, so-called of course, gender-ideology and I think that is something, a discussion that people in Germany had in the 60’s or 70’s, and now it is no longer a thing.” (ACL)

While feminist scholars argue that feminist activism in the Second World should not be assessed through First World Feminist lenses (Einhorn/Sever, 2003; Grabowska, 2012), feminist activists use the comparison with other Western European countries and the agendas of feminist activists there to create legitimacy for their demands.

Conclusion

Polish feminists reclaim ‘the Polish people’. There is a new generation of feminists in particular that asserts their belonging to the Polish people bridging previous cleavages between liberal and radical feminists when it comes to their approach to the Polish nation and national symbols. Furthermore, there is cooperation with other activist groups such as LGBTQ groups, putting gendered themes to the foreground when we want to analyse populism in Poland.

As the political Left is partly eclipsed by the duopoly between PiS and PO, it is the civil society and in particular feminist groups that have to push the feminist agenda in Poland. The European elections in 2019 saw the electoral success of a political party running with an explicitly pro-LGBTQ feminist platform, which indicates that part of the electorate is willing to support these demands also at the ballot. The 2019 parliamentary elections might prove to be another stepping stone in this direction.

and Ireland that prevented the inclusion of reproductive rights in EU legislation by securing national authority in so-called “questions of moral significance” (Nowicka, 2011: 123).



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However, it is the civil society that constitutes the vanguard of feminist policies. While it is pushing the feminist agenda, it is also subjected to attacks by the government, framing them as part of a foreign sponsored elite that is threatening the Polish nation. Hope for the Polish feminists therefore stems from the bottom-up grass-root approach and mass mobilisation. We can observe a post-NGO civil society based on grassroots (Jacobsson/Korolczuk, 2019) - while the right claims that they are sponsored by foreign agents, feminists and other civil society activists actually reclaim power and agency back from NGOs. Feminist activists have to find an effective way to balance references to Europe and claims of legitimacy in representing the Polish nation.

As the new generation of feminists investigated in this paper does not clearly frame 'the corrupt elite' as it is required by Mudde's often-cited ideological definition of populism, we cannot speak of a populist feminist Left in Poland. Left feminists face difficulties claiming to represent the pure people. Despite backlash, feminist activists have increased their visibility and the mere word 'feminism' has received a positive re-evaluation by a new generation of feminists.

Populism à la Laclau/Mouffe:

Polish feminists emphasise how they are against positioning themselves on one side of the polarised society, they are def opposing the government party but they do not buy into the antagonistic division of society and are opposing the antagonistic frontier between the people and the establishment

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Appendix: List of Cited activists

<i>Abbreviation</i>	<i>Organisation</i>	<i>Location</i>
ADL	Dziewuchy Dziewuchom	Lodz
BDL	Dziewuchy Dziewuchom	Lodz
CDL	Dziewuchy Dziewuchom	Lodz
AFW	Feminoteka	Warsaw
ADW	Dziewuchy Dziewuchom	Warsaw

