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The role of culture and tradition in the shift towards illiberalism: The counter-hegemonic challenge of Polish neo-traditionalism

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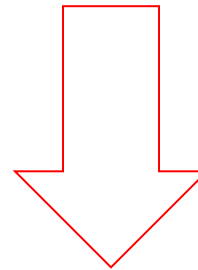


Original Research Project

Project Title: The role of culture and tradition in the shift towards illiberal democracy

Objectives: ESR2 will investigate the social and cultural factors explaining the transformation of liberal into illiberal democracies. Particular attention will be paid to the traditionalism and dogmatic thinking connected, in some countries, to religious traditions, ethnic nationalism and xenophobia, which may be partly seen as a legacy of communist isolation and the past of a 'closed society'.

Expected Results: ESR2's research will demonstrate how the shift to the right has been legitimised with reference to safeguarding national and religious cultures and traditions



A discursive shift

Illiberal Counter-revolutions (Zielonka, 2018)

“Liberalism is primarily a doctrine of power, both self-regarding and other-regarding: it aims to limit the power of other agents, and at the same time grants enormous prerogatives for itself.” (Legutko, 2016: 77).

“We had to state that a democracy does not necessarily have to be liberal. Just because a state is not liberal, it can still be a democracy. [...] The Hungarian nation is not simply a group of individuals but a community that must be organised, reinforced and in fact constructed. And so in this sense the new state that we are constructing in Hungary is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state. It does not reject the fundamental principles of liberalism such as freedom, and I could list a few more, but it does not make this ideology the central element of state organisation, but instead includes a different, special, national approach”. (Orbán, 2014).

Far from being accidental and axiologically neutral, liberalism is a comprehensive worldview that possesses a normative character, produces reality, and determines behaviors.

- Idea of negative freedom (freedom from).
- Axiological individualism - the individual as “the final adjudicator of morality” (Carse, 1994: 186).
- Primacy of the economic exchange in social relations.

Neo-traditionalism as a reaction against liberalism

“Hast Thou again forgotten that to man rest and even death are preferable to a free choice between the knowledge of Good and Evil? Nothing seems more seductive in his eyes than freedom of conscience, and nothing proves more painful”.

(Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Grand Inquisitor)

- While modernity and liberalism has led to progressive and fluid identities and the affirmation of the self as an ever-changing process, the recent return to traditions signals the need to create permanent and stable meanings.
- Traditions show the path to people, rather than leaving them complete freedom of choice.
- Whereas liberalism liberates individuals from external constraints and tell them to do what they believe is right, neo-traditionalism reproduces fragments of a past culture to give the recipe of life to its adherents

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Conceptual Framework: How to study the shift to (non-liberal) neo-traditionalism?

- **Hypothesis:** the shift to illiberalism has taken place in Poland as a (negative) non-liberal **reaction** against the dominant liberal discourse, and a (positive) neo-traditionalist discursive **production**, promoted by a neo-traditionalist *discourse coalition* (Hajer, 1995)
- **Research Question:**
 - How has the neo-traditionalist discourse in Poland emerged as a hegemonic project that aims at resignifying the core values of society?
- **Sub-questions:**
 - What are the rules characterizing the neo-traditionalist discourse? (social logic)
 - How is the hegemonic strategy of neo-traditionalism deployed? (political/hegemonic logic)
 - What are the fantasies that give an ideological ground for identity construction? (fantasmatic logic)
- **Ontology:** discourse-as-meaning
- **Theoretical Framework:** Hegemony (Gramsci) and Discourse Theory (Laclau)
- **Methodology:** Logics Approach (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) and hegemony analysis (Nonhoff, 2019)
- **Method:** discourse(-theoretical) analysis

The Neo-traditionalist Discourse Coalition in Poland (2015-2020)

Since the beginning of the 1990s, conservative ideologues and intellectuals propagated a non-liberal discourse and formed a discourse coalition (Dąbrowska, 2019).

The 'organic intellectuals' (Gramsci, 1953) of neo-traditionalism

1st level: Politicians (e.g. Jarosław Kaczyński)

2nd level: Ideologues and scholars (e.g. Ryszard Legutko; Aleksander Nalaskowski)

3rd level: Journalists (e.g. Do Rzeczy; W sieci; Gazeta Polska)

4th level: Think tank (e.g. Ordo Iuris)

5th level: Grassroot organizations (e.g. Młodzież Wszechpolska)

Sources:

Speeches

Books, articles

Columns

Documents

Articles, demonstrations

Neo-traditionalism in Poland. Social Logics.

- Poland → Nationalist logic

It is not only about our faith. It's about the fact whether Poles can manage this kind of situation when the holy symbols are being offended. Nations that could not do this died. They died because they lost the base of their community. This struggle is therefore more than just a defense for the rights of Christians. This is about keepings our nation alive.

(Sakiewicz, 2019/18)

- Polish People → Populist logic

But since a man that wants to be himself always "chooses" from the repertoire of possibilities offered by the culture in which he lives, then our Polish tradition offers something much more extraordinary than the most exclusive drink and fashionable atmosphere created by marketing. It offers the answer: [...] "Be yourself. Choose Jesus Christ"!

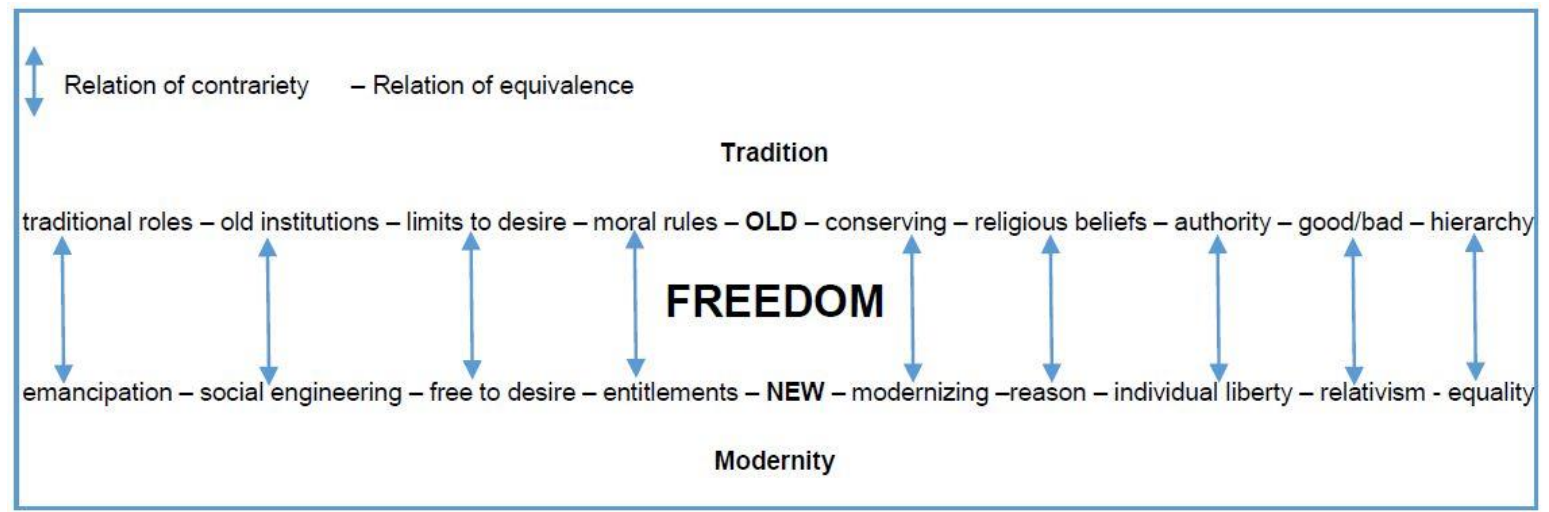
(Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz, 2019/34)

- Polishness → Traditionalist logic

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Neo-traditionalism in Poland. Political logic.



Articulation of neo-traditionalist demands defines ‘neo-traditionalist Polishness’ against ‘liberal Polishness’.

‘**Liberal Polishness**’: it is devoid of the old bonds to the Polish community and emphasizes the liberty of the individual.

‘**Neo-traditionalist Polishness**’: it refers to an ethno-nationalist identity and to the Christian roots of Poland. It protects traditional models of community and communitarian morality. It privileges authority and hierarchy at the expense of individual liberty; stability over relativism

“If we want to live much better in 5-10 years, but live in freedom and not to be subject to all what is happening to the West of our borders, where freedom is liquidated, where people are punished [. . .] for saying what they think; to stop this to come to our country, Poland must be an island of freedom, of our freedom, of Polish freedom! And **Polish freedom is the right to have our sacred values respected** so that we can live as we want; so that our lives can go with a rhythm that has been preordained centuries ago, millenniums ago by those who created our faith” (Kaczyński in Stalowa Wola, 2019).

Neo-traditionalism in Poland. Fantasmatic logic.

The construction of 'normality'

Neo-traditionalism promotes a demagogic and ideological mobilization to define what is to be considered '*normal*'. First, it pictures an idyllic 'normal' way of life as it poses a mythical past as a remedy to a failure – the broken promise of the post-1989 transformation. Second, it creates images of monstrosity and abnormality as a threat to normality.

In Białystok there were riots because someone didn't think (or they politically chose to ignore) and created in the heart of the conservative, that is normal, Poland a pro-pederasts march. Brigades of homosexuals invaded the capital of Podlasie. [...]

In Tykocin 20 km away it was still normal, as it usually is in Podlasie [...] On Monday people went to work normally. The majority of people to the fields. Because it was almost the harvest time. They will be working hard from the dawn till dusk, repair the machines broken in the fields, eat fatty food and sleep little. And so until Sunday, when they will put white shirts on sunburnt necks, ties, wear their jackets, their Sunday shoes and go to church, and then take their children for ice-cream.

(Nalaskowski, 2019/30)

Neo-traditionalism in Poland. Fantasmatic logic.

The construction of 'abnormality'



“Here it’s Poland, not Brussel – here there is no support for perversion” (chant sung by participants to the anti-GBT march in Krakow).

“Warning, rainbow plague! [...] This ideology aims to change the way of thinking, valuing and to create a different family with the exclusion from the social life of those who do not agree, to the point of legal stigmatization” (flyer distributed at the counter-march in Lublin).

“We stress our affection for those values they fear so much; they spit on; those values they want to deprive the Polish nation of. But we will surely guard them and raise the next generations in this spirit” (participant to the counter-march in Krakow).

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Conclusions

Expected Results: ESR2's research will demonstrate how the shift to the right has been legitimised with reference to safeguarding national and religious cultures and traditions

- The shift to the right in Poland has been legitimized with reference to the nation, the people, and culture signified in a neo-traditionalist fashion.
- This discursive shift followed a hegemonic strategy linking several non-liberal demands, and creating an antagonistic division between two different worldviews.
- The neo-traditionalist discourse is supported by fantasies that picture an idyllic scenario of an *authentic Polish way of life*, and a horrific dystopia threatening the *normal* Polishness.

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Thanks for your attention.