

## Make Misogyny Great Again. “Anti-gender” Politics in Poland

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In the on-going process of recurring patterns of social practice, the quality content of masculinity and femininity becomes not just the gender identities or gender displays of individuals, but also, and perhaps more importantly, a collective iteration in the form of culture, social structure, and social organization. The idealized features of masculinity and femininity as complementary and hierarchical provide a rationale for social relations at all levels of social organization from the self, to interaction, to institutional structures, to global relations of domination.

– Mimi Schippers<sup>1</sup>

We will glorify war – the world’s only hygiene  
– militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for and the scorn of women.

*Manifesto of Futurism, 1909*

### Political Community: Kaczyński’s Rejuvenation of Body Politics

The past decade has seen the rapid rise of authoritarian governments in many countries across the globe. A considerable amount of literature has been published on the decline of democracy. One of the most significant theoretical discussions focuses on populism. To date there has been little agreement on what “populism” stands for. Although differences of opinion still exist, there appears to be some agreement that populism is a type of political rhetoric which allows political actors to create polarization.<sup>2</sup> Polarization may put democracy at risk, but in order for it to become critically destructive, additional conditions must be met. My contention is that polarization undermines democracy when political opponents are presented as lacking political legitimacy and hence not belonging to the political community.<sup>3</sup> In such discourses, norms and values are weaponized to undermine the democratic debate itself.

Much of the current literature pays particular attention to right-wing populism, which has in some parts of the world empowered authoritarian leaders (Turkey, Hungary, Brazil and so on). These studies, however, do not sufficiently explain the relationship between so-called anti-gender politics and the rise of the authoritarian state. Not all far-right or radical right-wing

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<sup>1</sup> Mimi Schippers, “Recovering the Feminist Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony” in *Theory and Society* 36 (March 2007): 91.

<sup>2</sup> Populism is also often defined as “anti-elitism”. I would reframe that claim to say that it can also take the form of scapegoating vulnerable groups which are not part of the elite. Populism, in and of itself, does not have to be anti-democratic, but it often does become detrimental to democracy when it positions one group within society as the “enemy”.

<sup>3</sup> This is a process described by Chantal Mouffe as a move from agonism to antagonism. See Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics. Thinking the World Politically* (London, New York: Verso, 2014).

parties that have come to power in recent years (or sway current political affairs) across the world, in fact, challenge gender equality.<sup>4</sup> Quite the contrary, some define the liberation of women as one of their goals and criticize members of minorities or migrant communities for undermining women's rights.<sup>5</sup> So populism by itself has no inherently gendered structures.<sup>6</sup> It is only when populism serves to promulgate radical right-wing or far-right ideologies that this is actually true.<sup>7</sup> And so, I will concentrate on the Polish case so as to analyse how "populist nationalism" becomes a tool used to obliterate not only women's rights but also constitutional democracy as such.<sup>8</sup> My aim is to reply to the question of what radical right-wing populists gain by undermining women's rights. And my contention is that subverting gender equality in Poland is crucial to the process of undercutting the current political system's legitimacy, which opens the door to regime change.

To understand the interconnectedness between the national rejuvenation project of the Polish right wing and the attack on gender equality, one must place it in a broader context of the

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<sup>4</sup> Doris Geva, "Daughter, Mother, Captain: Marine Le Pen, Gender, and Populism in the French National Front," *Social Politics* (Summer 2018): 1–26.

<sup>5</sup> As demonstrated by Sara Farris, the far-right parties typically advance an Islamophobic agenda in the name of women's rights. And so, women's rights become a political tool used against migrant communities. For more, see Sara Farris, *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> I agree with Doris Geva that scholars often conflate populism and the Far Right, which is problematic as they are not the same. However, I disagree with the claim that populism *as such* is "gendered". There are many cases of left-wing populism which do away with the performative "father"/"mother" of the people. A case in point can be the kind of populist politics enacted by Podemos in Spain.

<sup>7</sup> In the Polish case, the party Law and Justice, which started as a right-wing party, has shifted towards the Far Right in recent years.

<sup>8</sup> Cas Mudde points out that populism should not be conflated with nationalism as these are two different analytical categories. Moffit suggests that the blurring of these concepts is a major theoretical problem, and many scholars use these terms almost as a way of designating synonymous ideas. However, populism, nationalism and nativism are not the same. These concepts can, however, co-exist since nationalism and populism often go hand in hand. What is more, populism has no inherent political affiliation. It can be right- or left-wing. The key insight in these processes was given by Stavrakakis, who pointed out that populism creates a chain of equivalence around the signifier of "the people", while nationalism aims to arrest this "floating" signifier in order to create boundaries within political community. In that sense, "nationalist populism" is a version of populism which undermines the universalism of peoplehood in order to create a narrow vision based, typically, on ethnic and cultural markers of identity. I would add that, in the case of populist nationalism, the enemy is not always the "elite" but rather a group which simply stands out, and thus, they are stigmatized or scapegoated (and serve as the "enemy"). The difference is between the universalism of "peoplehood" and the particularism of nationalism. It is also important to emphasize that in the Polish language, historically "nation" (*naród*) and "people" (*lud*) were associated with two opposing political traditions (the right- and left-wing, respectively). Hence, the idea of the "peoplehood" is associated with Marxism or the left-wing, more broadly. It would be almost impossible to imagine anyone of the Far Right or the right wing in Poland speaking of the "people". The middle ground between the two is occupied by "society". Society is seen not as a neutral term but as a stand-in for civic-minded individuals who associate or identify as citizens within civil society or, more generally, institutions of the state. Hence, the language used is not neutral – rhetoric matters a great deal. See Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London and New York: Verso, 2002). Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Yannis Stavrakakis, "Paradoxes of Polarization: Democracy's Inherent Division and the Anti-Populist Challenge," *American Behavioral Scientist* 16, no. 1 (2018): 4–5.

illiberal revolution brought about by the party Law and Justice (PiS; Prawo i Sprawiedliwość). In the chapter that follows, I will first give a brief summary of the key elements of Kaczyński's vision of state and society. Then, I will show why the attack on gender equality plays a central role in the political strategy of PiS. I will also demonstrate that these ideas are not novel but have been a constant element in Polish politics since the nineteenth century. This paper contests the claim that populism is the central problem of current Polish politics. It is rather the concept of "nation", or more precisely, the ultranationalist concept of political community that is the key ingredient in Polish "populist nationalism", which presents a challenge to the democratic order of the state. I concur with Dorit Geva that certain "gender performances" allow the Far Right to link national symbols with the illiberal political platform. Hence, the anti-gender campaign (or campaign against gender equality) figures as the necessary link between the illiberal agenda and populism and allows the ultranationalist vision of state and society to become anchored in the familiar sphere of the domestic.

The architect of the new political order, Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of Law and Justice, defined his vision of the Polish state, its "people", and the good life during a constitutional convention organized by PiS in 2003. In the speech Kaczyński delivered at the convention, he revealed his views on the political transformation currently in the making. First of all, according to Kaczyński, Poles had to return to their traditions, which had been systematically undermined by the communist regime and, after 1989, by "the challenge of Europeanization", for example, through legal norms prescribed by the European Union such as the principle of gender equality. What is more, Kaczyński defined "a positive program" which would halt the decline of "tradition" brought about by Europeanization:

Poles who identify as citizens [*Polak-obywateł*], as Europeans [*Polak-Europejczyk*] or free men [*Polak-człowiek wolny*] liberating themselves from the constraints of tradition or traditional life (...) shall soon confront the reality, which will prove their identity to be a work of fiction. It is important to unite in a social movement that will be able to bring about a moral revolution, which will not only reject evil but also introduce a positive program.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, Poles who define themselves as Europeans (i.e., support the core values of the EU) are assumed to have been duped by the fantasy of Europe ("lemmings") or are designated

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<sup>9</sup> Jarosław Kaczyński, "Speech" (September 20, 2003).

as “second class citizens” (*gorszy sort*).<sup>10</sup> The Catholic Church, according to Kaczyński, was the only institution which could legitimately articulate moral standards on Polish soil: “In today’s Poland there is only one known normative order, this order is based on the teachings of the Catholic Church and the national tradition.”<sup>11</sup>

In other words, the national tradition and the teachings of the Catholic Church are intertwined and only PiS can be seen as the custodian of this defined moral code. The most important element of that tradition is the “Polish family”. The adjective “Polish” is used by PiS politicians insistently to imply that the normative order defined by the Catholic Church sets standards and cultural norms that delimit the boundaries of what is acceptable as a family. As Kaczyński stated during the convention:

Neither the nation nor society are a loose association of individuals. The basis of all social life is the family. The family performs vital functions and guarantees the intergenerational continuity of a nation. This is why the family should be expressly protected by the law. And the special privileges families enjoy should be preserved and sheltered. They should be entrenched in the constitution. This not only means the protection of economic privileges and the safeguarding of parenting rights but also the exclusion from the aforementioned relationships other than that between a man and a woman.<sup>12</sup>

Interestingly, Kaczyński mentions both nation and society, two key words that define two different views on what constitutes political community in the Polish context. Society stands for civic bonds based on institutional and social affiliation or civic loyalty (republic, city, region, etc.), while nation, in such a view, is an intergenerational community (including those who are dead and those who are yet to be born). Logically, following from Kaczyński’s statement, the nation is understood and defined organically; in other words, there is the assumption of genetic/biological continuity. If nation is so charted, then, obviously, minority members, foreigners or refugees cannot become part of a community defined as so.<sup>13</sup> In short,

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<sup>10</sup> Jaroslaw Kaczyński, Republica interview, <https://tvn24.pl/polska/jaroslaw-kaczynski-w-tv-republika-gen-zdrady-najgorszy-sort-polakow-ra602334-3320596>. “Lemmings” is a comparison used by the Far Right to mock those voting for “liberals” or, alternatively, lower middle-class people working for big corporations who are focused on individual success. This term is supposed to underscore “weakness”, consumerism and a naïve approach to politics.

<sup>11</sup> Jarosław Kaczyński, “Speech,” (September 20, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Directly expressed by Kaczyński in a speech delivered during the convention is that minorities do not belong to the “nation”, yet Poland should be considered their homeland. Even so, Kaczyński emphasizes that minorities should not impose their norms and values on the majority.

there are two important ramifications to take away from Kaczyński's speech at the convention: The family is essential because it safeguards the existence of the "nation" not because it is important in and of itself. Secondly, it is assumed that only the relationship between a man and a woman can be considered family as it safeguards national survival. Kaczyński's vision transgresses the boundary between private and public in order to determine what is thinkable for men and women as a "good life". Hence, not only the emancipation of women but also the rights of the LGBTQ community are outside of the bounds of the defined political agenda, not to mention refugee protection; all of which undercut the "intergenerational continuity" of which Kaczyński speaks.

Another aspect of the political order Kaczyński denounces is the lack of primacy of nation in the 1997 constitution's text. The constitution, which encompasses both a republican-civic and a national idea of political community is rejected by PiS. Since the constitution puts Catholic Poles and atheists on the same footing, such equality is seen as a petrification of "communist" social relations. The separation of church and state (or secularism, more broadly), viewed from PiS's perspective, removes the clergy from the political sphere, which the right-wing leader construes as hostility towards the Catholic Church. The ideas presented in the constitution, according to Kaczyński, are a surrender of the drafters (former opposition) to their former communist tormentors (post-communist parties).<sup>14</sup> Kaczyński demands a clear break from the past and the restoration of the Catholic Church to its "proper" role, both in the state and within society. The proof that the 1997 constitution established a deceitful compromise is, according to the PiS leader, the rejection of the *invocatio Dei*, which would anchor the axiology of the political system in the Catholic tradition. The lack of an *invocatio Dei*, as seen by the right wing, led to the adoption of a foundational document devoid of markers of national identity, or more precisely, its Christian values.<sup>15</sup> The constitution, according to Kaczyński, promotes moral confusion by including a range of values (including humanism, secularism or even atheism) into the axiological realm. As an alternative, Kaczyński postulates a new republic which would start with a new constitution. This project, called the Fourth Republic, would present a new start for the "Polish nation", the only sovereign of the Polish state.<sup>16</sup>

This nativist concept of political community has longstanding roots in the political theories of Roman Dmowski (1864–1939), one of the founding fathers of the twentieth century Polish

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<sup>14</sup> The constitutional text was, indeed, approved by a predominantly left-wing parliament, and so the right-wing parties (the former Solidarity Electoral Action; AWS) undermined its legitimacy from the get-go.

<sup>15</sup> Typically, the right wing uses the term "Christian" instead of "Catholic" in a bid to underscore the universality of the creed and to defend against accusations of particularism.

<sup>16</sup> Jarosław Kaczyński, "Speech" (September 20, 2003).

state. Dmowski's views on nation, based on social Darwinism and national egoism, are typically contrasted with the political legacy of the multi-ethnic Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569–1791), which was embodied by Marshall Józef Piłsudski (1867–1935) during the time of the Second Republic. These two men and their visions of state and society could not be more different. Kaczyński's current political ideas, in that sense, are a prolongation of the legacy of Roman Dmowski. Clearly, this is not a straightforward line of tradition but rather the effect of this lingering vestige of the Second Republic (1918–39) in Polish politics.<sup>17</sup> Even if Kaczyński does not refer to Dmowski directly, the political imagery of Polish “nationalism” was shaped by this ideologist of interwar politics.

Dmowski defined nations based on a combination of racial, social and historical traits. As a biologist he often compared nations to living organisms, and he unquestionably imagined societies in such an “organic” way.<sup>18</sup> In *The Thoughts of a Modern Pole*, Dmowski urged Poles to become modern and defined “being modern” as a rejection of “passive” or “submissive behavior”, which he understood as a consequence of kindness, charity, humanitarianism, selflessness and tolerance.<sup>19</sup> These were the national characteristics, which according to Dmowski, had led Poland to ruin and were responsible for the loss of independence. The Polish nation, in Dmowski's view, should shed all the effeminate qualities which make it “weak”. The “national pedagogy” of Dmowski, which was directed against Jewish Poles, the gentry and, most importantly, any sense of “vulnerability” is echoed in current debates. Dmowski advocated military might and economic self-sufficiency, promoted anti-Semitism (especially directed against the Jewish middle class) as a “modern” political ideology and, finally, championed a national struggle understood in Darwinian terms as the survival of the fittest. Above all, Dmowski favoured social discipline, strength and moral unity.<sup>20</sup>

National egoism (or chauvinism) and thirst for international influence were the key values Dmowski endorsed, which is what makes his philosophy of nation so appealing to current populists. As Kevin Passimore pointed out, “In the 1890s many Polish nationalists broke with liberalism and prioritized ‘will’. They believed that xenophobia, aggression, and violence would make the Polish nation.”<sup>21</sup> A recent study by Paweł Brykczyński which focuses on the

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<sup>17</sup> Barbara Toruńczyk, “Dlaczego Endecja?” in *Opowieści Wschodnioeuropejskie* (Warszawa: Zeszyty Literackie, [1979] 2013), 125–135.

<sup>18</sup> Roman Dmowski, *Myśli Nowoczesnego Polaka* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Zachodnie, 1934), 51.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 65. See also: 50–55.

<sup>20</sup> All these traits were transferred into the Camp of Great Poland's (OWS; Obóz Wielkiej Polski) political action programme, which in its declaration, published in 1926, defined these principles as the key aspect of the national rejuvenation programme. See “Deklaracja Obozu Wielkiej Polski” (Wilno: Drukarnia “Ruch”, 1926).

<sup>21</sup> Kevin Passimore, *A Very Short Introduction to Fascism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 39.

assassination of President Gabriel Narutowicz in 1922 shows that the ideology of Endecja (as the interwar, right-wing party associated with Dmowski, formally named National Democracy, was often called) was far from benign, and its adherents were ready to use violence to enforce their vision of “Polishness”.<sup>22</sup> The assassination of Narutowicz was often portrayed by scholars as an insignificant incident perpetuated by an emotionally unstable individual. However, the assassin was clearly inspired by Endecja’s hateful anti-Semitic propaganda.

As Brykczyński suggests, Endecja’s affinity with fascism should be re-evaluated more seriously by scholars, especially since its legacy looms large in current Polish politics. This pertains, especially, to the rampant anti-Semitism, which was the driving force behind the assassination of Narutowicz.<sup>23</sup> The study of Endecja’s hate propaganda reveals why so many Poles confronted Narutowicz for being elected by “Jewish votes”, and why violence broke out in Warsaw after his election.<sup>24</sup> The events of December 1922 forced many politicians to support the marginalization of minorities in parliament; a few politicians took a chance by condemning the instigators of the violent clashes which broke out in the streets of Warsaw following the election of Narutowicz. This was a pivotal moment, according to Brykczyński, when most parties, for fear of political repercussions, surrendered to Endecja’s vision of Poland.

Eva Plach shows that the deep polarization of society in the interwar period resulted from a “sick post-partition political culture”.<sup>25</sup> In short, two “moral” camps clashed: the liberal-left leaning camp of the Piłsudskites, which attempted to modernize Poland and break “the seemingly inviolable connection between Catholicism, Polishness, and patriotism”,<sup>26</sup> and, secondly, the right-nationalist-Catholic camp, which decried secularization as a “deep moral rot that infested the Polish national body”.<sup>27</sup> In other words, these divisions were not only political but also ethical and cultural. As Plach emphasizes, the fight between the camps was about the political and moral authority to define the future of Poland.<sup>28</sup> What is even more important, the focus of many debates was on moral and sexual questions.<sup>29</sup> Obviously, this meant that gender roles and sexual morality became pivotal in many debates of the day. These controversies were a side-effect of the “encounter with European modernity”, which generated

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<sup>22</sup> Paweł Brykczyński, *Gotowi na przemoc. Mord, antysemityzm i demokracja w międzywojennej Polsce* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2017), 258–261.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 253–256

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 256.

<sup>25</sup> Eva Plach, *The Clash of Moral Nations: Cultural Politics in Piłsudski's Poland, 1926–1935* [Internet] (Ohio University Press, 2014), 6, <https://www.perlego.com/book/662536/the-clash-of-moral-nations>.

<sup>26</sup> Eva Plach, *The Clash of Moral Nations*, 7.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

an explosive combination of political ideas.<sup>30</sup> This blend of ideas and controversies about social modernization is still pertinent in today's Poland. The communist period created its own version of "communist nationalism", which was used to leverage the legitimacy of the communist Polish United Worker's Party (PZPR; Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza).<sup>31</sup> Yet, communism did not obliterate the ideological conflicts of the Second Republic; despite being crippled by censorship and authoritarianism, these disagreements lived on among the Polish opposition and intellectuals.<sup>32</sup>

When construed in its historical context, the "anti-gender campaign" cannot come as a surprise. The architects of the organic "nation" protect not only the living but also those who perished (by preserving their memory) and future members (by making sure there are enough women ready to give birth). Politically, women are important primarily as mothers, as they prolong and protect the existence of the nation. In other words, what women do with their bodies ceases to be (if it ever has been) a private matter and becomes their social and political *raison d'être*. The emancipation of women undermines the national project as understood by the right wing. Hence, the "dead bodies" of past heroes and the bodies of those yet to be born take centre stage in the national project of Law and Justice.<sup>33</sup> The idea of the revitalization of nation, which is advocated by Kaczyński, is close to what expert on fascism Roger Griffin calls the "palingenetic myth".<sup>34</sup> According to the founding father of the Far Right, Roman Dmowski, the moral rebirth of the nation would allow Poles to become truly "modern", and, as I will demonstrate, this is also the kind of "modernizing" philosophy circulating among the ideologues of the current regime.

### **Polish Women and Body Politics**

The interwar period (1918–39) was the heyday of women's liberation. Polish women were granted the right to vote in November 1918, only weeks after Poland regained independence, putting an end to 123 years of subjugation to the bordering imperial powers. The role of women in Polish society (in and outside the home) was strongly pronounced; hence, Polish women achieved suffrage early on. However, this was not to everybody's liking and soon campaigns

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 10

<sup>31</sup> Marcin Zaremba, *Komunizm, legitymizacja, nacjonalizm. Nacjonalistyczna legitymizacja komunistycznej władzy w Polsce* (Warszawa: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 2005).

<sup>32</sup> Barbara Toruńczyk, *Dlaczego Endecja?* 125–135.

<sup>33</sup> See also: Katherine Verdery, *The Political Life of Dead Bodies. Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

<sup>34</sup> Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism. The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1991).



against the presence of women in public life were initiated. Women were reminded of their place within society – assigned to them by “God and history”. In the Polish case, women’s rights and the issue of “national survival” have always been intertwined. The continuity of the Polish language and culture during the nineteenth century when the Polish state lost sovereignty was, indeed, possible to a large extent as a result of its nurturing within the private realm of the home (i.e., gentry estates). As Eva Plach points out:

Commentators from across the political spectrum in the Second Republic heralded women of the partition era for fulfilling their “natural” roles as bearers of national culture as well as for having played an indispensable role in the national struggle, for protecting national virtues, for passing along language and tradition, and thus, at the most basic level, for ensuring, the very existence of the Polish nation.<sup>35</sup>

The political role women played outside of the formal political realm under partitions blurred the boundary between public and private, which was also the reason why they were often attacked during the Second Republic for their alleged misconduct when, instead of supporting national causes, activists championed women’s self-determination. Women were also engaged in educational rights campaigns and other social and political activities, which gave them some leverage, but this was also the reason for intensifying attacks, notably mounted by Endecja. And so, women’s liberation became the axis of the debate about “modernizing” in the Second Republic. The conventional division of social responsibilities of men and women in society changed, which was seen by the nationalist camp as clear evidence of the “moral” corruption of Polish society. This type of moral panic, as historian Eva Plach pointed out, was quite common in many European countries after the Great War.<sup>36</sup> In Poland, it took on a particular dimension, and the right-wing parties consolidated to attack the changing mores, among which one could find familiar tropes of “Americanization”, provocative dances, divorced women, radio, free thinking and so on.<sup>37</sup> The notions of marriage, divorce and abortion, in fact, shifted dramatically in that period.

The culture war between the liberal-left and the Catholic right-wing sections of the society intensified during the *sanacja* period.<sup>38</sup> The immorality the right wing associated with all

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<sup>35</sup> Eva Plach, *The Clash of Two Moral Nations*, 21.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>37</sup> Eva Plach cites the right-wing publicist Mieczysław Piszczkowski. *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>38</sup> The term “*sanacja*” is generally understood to mean the period after the 1926 May Coup. Following the assassination of Naurtowicz, Piłsudski seized power in a military coup in order to prevent a right-wing takeover of the state. Many left-liberal circles welcomed the development to begin with; later, when the *sanacja* camp changed course, the relationship with the left-liberal intelligentsia circles was severed.

aspects of women's liberation was seen as anti-Polish and a danger to the nation. Right-wing journals and periodicals challenged the advocates of women's rights. The most prominent target of such attacks was Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, a doctor and passionate activist who fought for family planning, birth control and civil marriage. In his famous book, *Piekło Kobiet* (Women's hell), Boy-Żeleński argues that abortion should be legal.<sup>39</sup> He offers an elaborate defence of women's reproductive rights. For example, he condemns the right wing's argument that the duty of women was to preserve population growth:

The key line of argumentation [is] the issue of population growth, the so-called population policy – an apparently effective argument but only deceptively so. The problem known to humanity since antiquity has always been judged according to the needs of the moment; it either prohibited, tolerated or authorized abortion. The basis of this argument today is universal militarism. But a future war, which everyone hopes to prevent, would not so much depend on the number of people as it would on inventions, technical means, chemicals and so on.<sup>40</sup>

As was pointed out in the introduction to this chapter, the idea of “modernizing” according to Roman Dmowski included developing military power. Women had a part to play in such a scenario, but it was strictly related to their role as mothers, which Boy decried in his writing. In that sense the discussions about political, social and sexual morality were intertwined, and the ideas of rebirth of nation circulated in the public debate. Yet each camp had its own understanding of that very idea. In the right-wing's vision, a woman should relinquish her rights in the collective interest of the nation. For the liberal-left intelligentsia, the Second Republic was a period in Polish history when women finally could realize their potential beyond service to the national cause.

To sum up, the attainment of women's full equality was stalled by the right-wing rhetoric of the interwar period. Women were forced to make an impossible choice between being considered “moral” and “patriotic” or traitors of the national cause. When they were not docile and cared about their individual freedom, women would be condemned as destroying the social order, which was seen as underpinning a morally healthy national life. The following section will discuss how the issue of women's position in the public sphere was manipulated by the communist regime and served as a legitimization strategy for the regime in its takeover of the

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<sup>39</sup> This text is related to the changes introduced in the Criminal Code in 1932 which made abortion legal in cases where the health of the mother was endangered or in case of rape.

<sup>40</sup> Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, *Piekło kobiet*, <https://wolnelektury.pl/katalog/lektura/pieklo-kobiet.html>.

nationalist rhetoric.

### **Women's Rights as the "Red Scare"**

It is somewhat ironic that gender equality and the politics of gender mainstreaming are presented by the right-wing parties as the "Marxist spectre" haunting Poland. This is a paradox for the reason that, since the end of the Stalinist period in Poland (1948–56), the inclusion of women into the public sphere had intermittent or no state support. Although the communist regime paid lip service to the commitment to improve the conditions of life for Polish women, the reality was very far from that laudable pledge. Bizarrely, after Stalin's death, women's emancipation (especially when it comes to sexual liberation) was, often openly, discouraged. In Małgorzata Fidelis's analysis of gender politics in communist Poland, the author points out that the communist party was actually approving of the "biological division" of roles between men and women. One of the reasons was the battle over political legitimacy fought against the Catholic Church. Although the Church and the communist party had very complex interests and the church-state relations under communism were mostly hostile, in some respects the Church had seen the party as their ally.<sup>41</sup> A glaring example might be the issue of reproductive rights.<sup>42</sup>

This tendency was visible, particularly, after Gomułka took office. His model of communist society was closer to the lifestyles of rural communities he grew up in and defended in his politics. The state put emphasis on "men's superiority over women"; the model proletarian became a male coal miner.<sup>43</sup> Working women, on the other hand, became the symbol of social degeneration in the Stalinist period. There was a state-sponsored campaign to remove women from jobs perceived as being traditionally a male domain.<sup>44</sup> In order to prove its legitimacy, the new, post-Stalinist regime embraced pre-war style nationalism, which was used to appease workers throughout the communist period.<sup>45</sup> The attack on the Stalinist model of gender relations was one of the central elements of the strategy applied to prove the "national" credentials of the new regime.

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<sup>41</sup> After the war, the Catholic Church supported certain policies of the communist government, for instance, the agrarian reform. For more, see Mikołaj Kunicki, "Between Accommodation, Resistance, and Dialogue: Church-State Relations in Communist Poland, 1945–1989", in *Peaceful Coexistence or Iron Curtain. Austria, Neutrality, and Eastern Europe in the Cold War and Détente, 1955–1989*, ed. Wolfgang Mueller, Arnold Suppan, 393–411 (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2009).

<sup>42</sup> Małgorzata Fidelis, *Kobiety, komunizm i industrializacja w powojennej Polsce* (Warszawa: WAB, 2010), 48–50.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 189–223.

<sup>45</sup> Marcin Zaremba, *Komunizm, legitymizacja, nacjonalizm*, 81–94.

In her seminal study on women and industrialization, Fidelis argues that gender roles “remained a primary way of demarcating and understanding social hierarchies” in communist Poland.<sup>46</sup> Fidelis claims that enforcement of gender boundaries actually became the most valued instrument of legitimization for the new regime after Stalinism. Nevertheless, this does not mean that there were no female workers after de-Stalinization took place. Quite the contrary, female agency persisted, undermining not only traditional roles at home but also clashing with the party-state’s vision of Polish socialist society. Communist gender equality, however, was distorted as the social and cultural context, as Fidelis shows, was illiberal. There was no socially progressive legislation (as was the case in the 1920s in the Soviet Union). In the 1956–59 period, abortion was practically illegal, there was very strong pressure put on women to stay at home, underscored by the celebration of motherhood. The cliché image of *Matka Polka* (the Polish mother) did not go away. At the same time, women workers were treated much worse than men and were pushed out of their jobs. Assaults and sexual misconduct in the workplace were common. Finally, many women themselves opposed changes to the “traditional” way of life.

The most important conclusion of Fidelis’s study is that the post-1989 backlash against women’s rights is not very different from communist policies. Therefore, the right-wing’s idea that gender equality is re-establishing communist (Marxist) practices is rather mystifying as the right-wing backlash against equal opportunity should be seen as comparable to communist strategies. In both cases, women’s rights are used to prove “national” credentials and confirm legitimacy of the respective political agenda. Evidently, the “red menace” works quite well rhetorically in a society hostile to any traces of Marxist heritage, but, under close investigation, this line of argumentation cannot hold. In order to explain this paradox, I will examine the debate over the revocation of the Istanbul Convention. As I will demonstrate, the attack on social equality is at the heart of illiberal politics, which, when combined with ultranationalism, becomes irreconcilable with constitutional democracy. Populism serves as a useful tool in aggravating these divisions.

### **The fight against the Istanbul Convention and the Attack on “Western” Values**

After the obliteration of the Constitutional Tribunal and the autonomy of the judiciary, it has become difficult to categorize Poland as a functioning constitutional democracy. I strongly disagree with the term “illiberal democracy” used to describe the current political arrangement,

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<sup>46</sup> Małgorzata Fidelis, *Kobiety, komunizm i industrializacja*, 2.

which simply masks authoritarianism. Nonetheless, there is theoretical value in applying the idea of illiberalism in the analysis of the social realm. I propose to define “illiberalism” as support for the maintenance of social hierarchies which are endorsed by authorities (legally or otherwise) and enjoy recognition within society. Such hierarchies may be related to gender, sex, sexual orientation, age, religion and so on. Illiberalism is, in that sense, a sociopolitical agenda which rejects equality. Equality is the basic premise of democracy (not only liberal democracy). Therefore, “illiberal democracy” is a contradiction in terms used as a rhetorical stratagem by those authoritarians who endorse discrimination, racism and chauvinism, and it allows them to present their political project as functioning within the bounds of democratic acceptability. This is undoubtedly a trick that works to a point, and this is why it is important to achieve conceptual clarity when it comes to the characterization of illiberalism.

Liberalism, in the political sphere, is strictly related to the idea of human rights and their entrenchment in the constitutional order of the state, as well as to the system of checks and balances known as *the rule of law*. As already pointed out, Polish liberal democracy came to an end with the elimination of the judicial system’s autonomy. The separation of branches of government is the basic premise of the rule of law, yet the Polish courts are now, practically, under direct political control. Thus, the political system engineered by PiS is a combination of social and political illiberalism which cannot be regarded as “democracy”, simply put.<sup>47</sup>

The question of the current regime’s legitimacy is tied to the clashing ideas of political community. The most recent electoral victory of Andrzej Duda confirms that the regime enjoys genuine social support. Even if the elections were conducted with serious irregularities, the victory of Duda shows that Polish society is fragmented when it comes to the vision of the future. Whether this victory confirms that Duda’s voters share Kaczyński’s vision of political community is another question. Undeniably, Duda, endorsed by PiS, backs the ideas and values underpinning PiS’ right-wing, nationalist platform. In that sense, the “illiberal revolution” scored another victory. However, there is strong opposition to this autocratic political strategy coming from more moderate sections of Polish society – mainly Civic Platform (PO; Platforma Obywatelska) supporters.

One of the most important aspects of the right-wing vision of nation is the “naturalization” of

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<sup>47</sup> Hence, the “rule of majority” in conditions of structural inequality should not qualify as democratic as it generates power imbalances precluding justice. Obviously, structural hierarchies can be endorsed by societies and can be legitimate. But such systems of government should not be classified as democracies as, typically, they preclude parts of the society from decision-making and self-government due to stark power imbalances. A good case in point is the system of apartheid. Any system that creates different categories of citizenry (legally or culturally) should be seen as infringing upon the basic premise of democracy.

social and cultural hierarchies; in particular, the hierarchies within the family structure and between men and women. These hierarchies are central to the illiberal project. And so, I will analyse here the discussion that took place in the Polish parliament in 2015 in which the anti-gender rhetoric was particularly visible, specifically the debate over the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, also known as the Istanbul Convention. In July 2020, government officials announced the intention to withdraw from the convention. The debate that took place in parliament in 2015 sheds light not only on the rationale for such a step but also, more broadly, on how the anti-gender ideology is operating within the political strategy of PiS.

The convention sets legally binding standards for the protection of women against sexual harassment, domestic violence, stalking, forced marriage, forced abortion and so on, offering preventive measures, protection of victims, the state obligation to take legal action against perpetrators and, most importantly, effective redress. Thus, the document operates mainly within the area of national criminal legislation. Yet, the ideologues of the right wing see it as a dangerous document – to use the words of a Polish MP, a “Trojan horse”, introducing “gender ideology” into the national legislation.<sup>48</sup>

As pointed out before, the Polish right wing understands gender roles and the “national tradition” as entangled. Hence, any shift in the “traditional” understanding of the social position of men and women is portrayed as an attack on the nation per se. The key ingredient of the naturalized vision of nation is hierarchy, which the convention undermines. The convention postulates “the realization of de jure and de facto equality between women and men” as a “key element in the prevention of violence against women”. So, by way of the convention, the state is not only obliged to protect women from violence but also make sure that equality becomes incorporated into the systemic structures of the state and in everyday social practice. What seems particularly aggravating to the right wing is the last aspect, namely the de facto elimination of social hierarchies. Without hierarchies in which power and authority are unequally distributed within society, the illiberal project loses its core message. And so, PiS’s MPs attacked the convention as “destruction of family” (Saurka), “disintegration of our civilization” (Girzyński) and a “crime against [Polish] social order” (Wróbel), to give just a few examples.<sup>49</sup>

The convention was caricatured by the MPs not because it prevented violence against women,

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<sup>48</sup> “Sprawozdanie Stenograficzne, 86 Posiedzenie Sejmu w dniu 6 lutego 2015r” (2015), 255.

<sup>49</sup> “Sprawozdanie Stenograficzne, 86 Posiedzenie Sejmu w dniu 6 lutego 2015r” (2015), 249–255.

but because it defined the discrimination of women as a form of violence.<sup>50</sup> The preamble begins by “recognizing that violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between women and men, which have led to domination over, and discrimination against, women by men”. Understandably, the structural nature of violence against women calls for social change. And this is precisely the element which the right-wing MPs opposed most zealously. The most striking statements of the debate are those of MP Marzena Wróbel: “Think about it, because in this way [through the convention] you destroy Polish society, you destroy the nation.”<sup>51</sup>

The defence of the naturalized social hierarchies by women is an element of a strategy which Mimi Schippers called “hegemonic femininity”.<sup>52</sup> This strategy, as pointed out by many scholars, is often applied by women within the right wing. Dorit Geva characterizes “hegemonic femininity” as a strategy used by women to reproduce “hierarchies of race, sexuality, gender, and class; and, at the same time, reproduce masculine domination over women” and shows how this technique is used by Marie Le Pen.<sup>53</sup> As pointed out by many scholars, by underscoring social hierarchy, right-wing women legitimize their own standing within radical right-wing and far-right movements. A case in point may be women within the fascist Hindutva movement in today’s India.<sup>54</sup>

Further, one of the most contentious ideas of the convention is the very definition of gender. The convention defines gender as “socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men”. First of all, the idea that gender should be translated as *pleć społeczno-kulturowa* stirred passionate debates among MPs during their work on the convention. Zbigniew Girzyński characterized the idea that gender was socially and culturally constructed as a “crime against our social order”. MP Beata Kempa stated,

And if you don’t know what’s going on, it is about confusing people’s minds. This is why [the convention is insisting on] education. Mr Niesiołowski, you should be

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<sup>50</sup> According to the convention, “‘Violence against women’ is understood as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life”.

<sup>51</sup> Marzena Wróbel, in “Sprawozdanie Stenograficzne, 86 Posiedzenie Sejmu w dniu 6 lutego 2015r” (2015), 251.

<sup>52</sup> Mimi Schippers, “Recovering the Feminist Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony” in *Theory and Society* (March 2007): 85–102.

<sup>53</sup> Dorit Geva, op.cit., 6.

<sup>54</sup> Kalyani Devaki Menon, *Everyday Nationalism. Women of the Hindu Right in India* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

aware of that fact, because, in line with the provisions of this convention, as far as gender is concerned, we can dispense with biology. And so, if in four days you feel that you want to be a woman, you can be called Stefania Niesiołowska – likewise for others [*laughter in the chamber*]. Such [*bell sounds*] is the purpose of this convention. This is clear.<sup>55</sup>

Undeniably, in order to achieve the aim of de facto equality of men and women, the state must undertake campaigns and educational projects which are aimed at eliminating stereotypes, unfairness and other elements of what the convention calls “unequal power relations”. The educational aspect was attacked by all of PiS’s MPs, with Zbigniew Girzyński labelling such an approach the greatest danger as the convention transformed “the model of society”.<sup>56</sup> During the debate, MPs attacked Małgorzata Fuszara, the Civic Platform appointee to the Government Plenipotentiary for Equal Treatment, and the financial resources spent by the state on her division’s projects (Kempa).<sup>57</sup> Among the key questions raised by Ludwik Dorn during the discussion over the vote were those related to these very aspects of the convention.<sup>58</sup> The MP inquired about the financing of education and NGO campaigns that endorse gender equality. In fact, Articles 12 and 13 of the convention call for the “eradication” of customs and traditions which are based on belief in the inferiority of women.

This is also the reason why female right-wing members were there to legitimize the condemnations of the boost given to the issue of women’s rights by the legal provisions of the convention. Their role was to mock the gendered aspects of violence in Polish society. The convention places upon governments an obligation to “ensure that culture, custom, religion, tradition or so-called honour shall not be considered as justification for any acts of violence” within its scope. This is exactly what the ornate, yet bizarre speeches were aimed to defend. Clearly, the elephant in the room during the parliamentary elections back in 2015 was the Catholic Church. The Polish bishops’ protest against so-called gender ideology was reported by the media around the world. In a pastoral letter issued by Poland’s Bishops’ Conference in 2013, the representatives of the Catholic Church called out gender ideology as Marxist and thus destructive. Unquestionably, the letter distorted not only the definition of gender but also problems related to gender disparity. According to the letter, “gender ideologists” claim that

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<sup>55</sup> Beata Kempa, “Sprawozdanie Stenograficzne, 86 Posiedzenie Sejmu,” 251.

<sup>56</sup> Zbigniew Girzynski, “Sprawozdanie Stenograficzne, 86 Posiedzenie Sejmu,” 251.

<sup>57</sup> Beata Kempa, *ibid.*, 257.

<sup>58</sup> Ludwik Dorn, *ibid.*, 257.



“humans can freely determine whether they want to be men or women”, which certainly is not the idea inherent in the term.<sup>59</sup> This was just the beginning, and it was followed by an avalanche of statements by the Catholic Church attacking gender studies, women’s equality and the rights of the LGBT community. Characteristically, all these statements are alarmist in tone and use the straw man tactic of distorting the arguments of those advocating for more equality and calling for rights for the LGBTQ community. For example, on 28 September 2019, Archbishop of Kraków Marek Jędraszewski, in a pastoral letter, repeated the distorted claims about Polish women’s fight for parity, fairness and equality but also confronted the LGBTQ community, adding that the fight for their rights was a “totalitarian practice” in which Catholic Poles are not only forced to “promote” the inclusion of the LGBTQ community but are also becoming second-class citizens if they disagree.<sup>60</sup> Such statements are misrepresenting the struggles of the LGBTQ community, and, what is worse, they are also stigmatizing its members. Furthermore, not only are these accusations not fact-based but they are also generating the very problems they claim to address, such as the assault on human dignity.

PiS MPs like to present themselves as defenders of Christianity. The defence of Christianity or even Christian civilization is also a popular leitmotif of the right wing and the Far Right.<sup>61</sup> The word “civilization” was used at least ten times in the debate over the Istanbul Convention. The idea of gender equality was presented as the reason for the moral decay of Western Europe. Beata Kempa attacked Sweden as an example of a country that had destroyed the traditional division of roles, which, according to her, led to social disarray.<sup>62</sup>

In March 2015, the presidential candidate, Andrzej Duda strongly rejected the convention, saying that it was “exceptionally devious”, given that it introduced “ideas which do not exist within our tradition”: “If I win the elections, I won’t ratify this convention. The category of gender does not exist within Polish law, and most people, commonsensically, realize that nature determines gender and not some sociocultural considerations.”<sup>63</sup> What is under attack here is the idea that men and women are equal because gender equality is the first stepping

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<sup>59</sup> Bishops Conference of Poland, “Pastoral Letter” (December 2013), accessed August 2020: <https://episkopat.pl/pastoral-letter-of-the-bishops-conference-of-poland-to-be-used-on-the-sunday-of-the-holy-family-2013/>.

<sup>60</sup> Marek Jędraszewski, “Totus Tuus” (2019), accessed July 2020 <https://diecezja.pl/aktualnosci/totus-tuus-modlitewny-maraton-za-kosciol-i-ojczyzne/>.

<sup>61</sup> Zbigniew Girzyński, *ibid.*, 257. Typically, the Polish right wing quite openly expresses racist views. Poles are seen as the only defenders of Christianity in the Western world against the onslaught of liberalism. Such views are quite often expressed by the EMP Ryszard Legutko in the European Parliament. See, for example, <https://thepointmag.com/politics/the-demon-in-democracy/>.

<sup>62</sup> “Sprawozdanie Stenograficzne, 86 Posiedzenie Sejmu w dniu 6 lutego 2015r” (2015), 256.

<sup>63</sup> *TVN24* (March 15, 2015), accessed August 2020, <https://tvn24.pl/polska/konwencja-antyprzemocowa-duda-konwencja-niebezpieczna-i-perfidna-ra524325-3296085>.

stone in the process of dismantling other inequalities, which are the basis not only of male power in and outside of Polish homes but other institutions within Polish society. Because the Catholic Church is the most powerful ally of the right wing and the Far Right in Poland, this is unlikely to change in the near future.

### **Conclusion: Symbolic Validation, Women and Populism**

The misnomer “illiberal democracy” can be seen as a rhetorical tool that is applied to mask a political order rooted in the suppression of equality, not only among men and women but in all social relations more broadly. Because Poland does not have a substantive migrant community, the enemy that all populists need had to be invented. And “feminists” (i.e., all women who have independent social standing), as well as members of the LGBTQ community, are a perfect fit. Obviously, this kind of antagonistic argument works rather well and the “traitors” of the national cause, such as free-thinking women, liberals, immigrants and the LGBTQ community, are successfully pilloried as those whose very existence within the political community should be a cause for concern. What is at stake here is the very order of the state. The fight to define the “right” standards of morality and “authentic” cultural traits which are acceptable within the Polish nation aims to impose a unified vision of society. In such a vision, any dissent or difference is considered an obstruction of national unity. This, in turn, allows enforcement over what is legitimate within the political system and so what should be legal. The project of the Fourth Republic currently in the making tacitly imposes a new social contract. One that is based on Catholic norms and values. Those who oppose are not considered members of the “nation”, and so their status within the political community becomes precarious. Only “authentic” Poles, that is, those who internalize these norms and values, can be considered legitimate members. The normative project of “authentic” Poles places the reproduction of nation within the family at its centre and so, integrates Catholicism, discipline and biological reproduction of the population.

The alleged nihilism of the “liberal elites” is portrayed as a danger to national sovereignty. Europeanization of Poles is painted as a treacherous and naïve political dream which should be undercut at all costs. Consequently, in such a rendering of social disorder, women’s freedoms and rights take centre stage. The preservation of social hierarchies is the key aim of the attack on women’s reproductive rights and, more broadly, on women’s position in society. Clearly, the dismantling of women’s rights is only the first step, but the most critical one. It is difficult to imagine an authoritarian political system in an egalitarian society; hence, in order to make the authoritarian state a reality, those supporting this extreme project must dismantle any

attempts to create equal opportunity. This is why, as in the above quote, gender equality is presented as “nihilism” and progressives are vilified. Social modernization would inevitably change the model of nationalism based on militarism, hierarchy and dreams of domination currently being promoted by PiS. Hence, the so-called culture war is aimed at obstructing the social modernization set off by access to the European Union.

The backlash against gender equality can be, paradoxically, seen as a success story of the progressives within Polish society. The vehement attack on “gender ideology” and the LGBTQ community is a testimony to the powerful social changes that access to the European Union set in motion. These social changes are part of the social modernization programme advocated for by Polish intellectuals and social activists since the First Republic. This unfinished (or even partially neglected) project can only succeed if those agents within society who are pro-democratic get enhanced financial assistance and international political support. The Far Right is well aware of that fact, hence NGOs fighting discrimination and educational campaigns for a more equal society, especially within the educational system, are under attack. What we are witnessing in present day-Poland is a deadly fight over different visions of state and society. These two are intertwined and women’s rights are the key to this entanglement.

Finally, the hierarchical vision of social order and traditional authority promulgated by the Far Right enjoys popularity not only because of the clash between different visions of political community but also owing to the failure of the Third Republic to provide security and stability. These are sought after within the traditional structures and networks of Polish society. Poles have never experienced the benefits of a more equal society, which the Third Republic had never been. This is not a novel insight and has already been identified by David Ost in his seminal work *The Defeat of Solidarity. Anger and Politics in Post-communist Europe*.<sup>64</sup> Given that these arguments are not new, I will not restate them here. However, I would like to point out that gender equality, which was not addressed by Ost, is related strictly to economic development, to which hundreds of studies give evidence.

In her essay *Capitalism vs. Climate*, Naomi Klein points out that the rise of the alt-right or radical right-wing in many countries across the globe, coupled with the rise of inequality, will only be accelerated by the climate crisis. The attack on “gender equality” is not fortuitous. The matter of a more balanced society, where there is less, not more hierarchy, is, in the conditions of the current climate challenge, literally, a matter of life or death. Surely, authoritarian leaders

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<sup>64</sup> David Ost, *The Defeat of Solidarity. Anger and Politics in Post-communist Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

will not care for more equality, not among men and women nor within society more broadly. It is not a coincidence that the Polish Catholic Church, in its controversial pastoral letters, combines attacks on the environmentalist movement with the fight for women's equality and the LGBTQ community. This is why, as Klein points out, progressives must promote not only a "New Deal" strategy but also must encourage the very worldview authoritarians try to suppress. This worldview rests on "interdependence rather than hyperindividualism, reciprocity rather than dominance, and cooperation rather than hierarchy".<sup>65</sup> Women's empowerment is the key, and this is why the discourse of gender ideology will remain a major weapon of the Far Right in the future.

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<sup>65</sup> Naomi Klein, "Capitalism vs. Climate," in *The (Burning) Case for a Green New Deal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019), 98.